9
KAZUMA KAMACHI
ILLUSTRATION BY
KIYOTAKA HAIMURA
A Certain Magical Index

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[STAB SWORD]

A soul arm that extracts the religious meaning behind execution and fatal stabbings and amplifies, compresses, and focuses it as much as possible. Legends say the Stab Sword can pierce the skin of dragons and pin them to the earth. Has no effect on normal humans, but simply pointing its tip at a saint kills them in an instant, regardless of the distance.

contents

PROLOGUE *THE PREPARATIONS AS SEEN BY A THIRD PARTY* Parent's_View_Point.

CHAPTER 1 *STARTING SIGNAL UNDER THE BLAZING SUN* Commence_Hostilities.

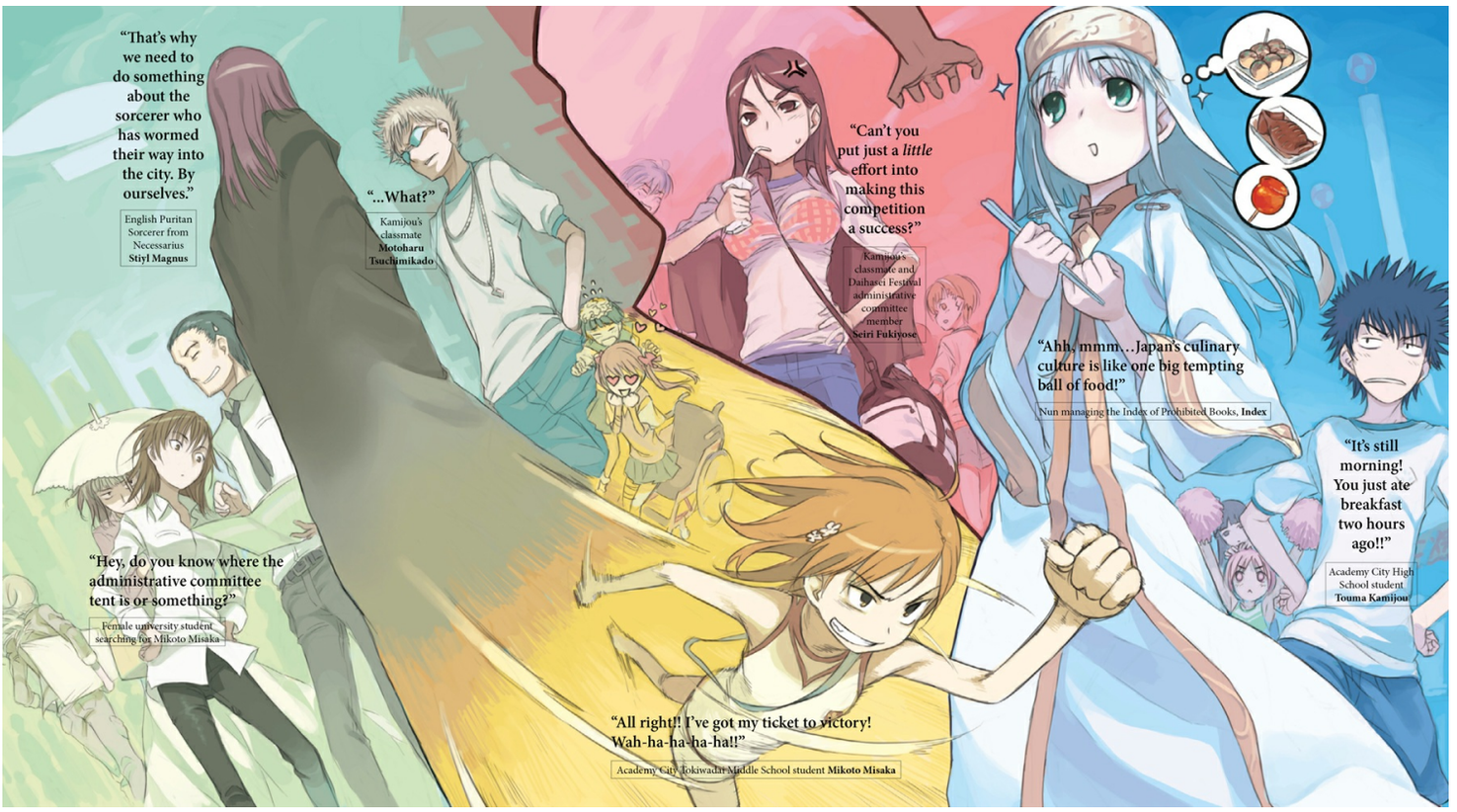
CHAPTER 2 *STADIUM OF SORCERER AND ESPER* "Stab_Sword."

CHAPTER 3 *TACTICS OF THE HUNTER AND THE HUNTED* Worst_Counter.

CHAPTER 4 *SHALL THE BATTLE END IN VICTORY* Being_Unsettled.

[DAIHASEI FESTIVAL]

A massive athletic meet held in Academy City, the supernatural-ability development organization with just under 2.3 million people. All of the city's schools compete against one another over the course of seven days, from September 19 to September 25.


"That's why we need to do something about the sorcerer who has wormed their way into the city. By ourselves."
English Puritan Sorcerer from Necessarius **Stiyl Magnus**
"...What?"
Kamijou's classmate **Motoharu Tsuchimikado**
"Can't you put just a *little* effort into making this competition a success?"
Kamijou's classmate and Daihasei Festival administrative committee member **Seiri Fukiyose**
"Ahh, mmm...Japan's culinary culture is like one big tempting ball of food!"
Nun managing the Index of Prohibited Books, **Index**
"It's still morning! You just ate breakfast two hours ago!!"
Academy City High School student **Touma Kamijou**
"Hey, do you know where the administrative committee tent is or something?"
Female university student searching for Mikoto Misaka
"All right!! I've got my ticket to victory! Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"
Academy City Tokiwadai Middle School student **Mikoto Misaka**

"How...*lewd*. This was only foreplay.
Have I already brought you to your knees?"
Roman Orthodox smuggler nicknamed Route Disturber, **Oriana Thomson**

A Certain Magical Index

VOLUME 9

KAZUMA KAMACHI
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YEN ON
NEW YORK

PROLOGUE

The Preparations As Seen By a Third Party
Parent's_View_Point.

The Daihasei Festival.

An event held by Academy City over the course of seven days, from September 19 to September 25. The event was, in essence, a giant school athletic meet. Every school in the city would be participating in the festivities. Given that the city was one giant organization for the development of supernatural abilities and took up all of western Tokyo, and given that 80 percent of the city's 2.3 million total people were students, the event was *massive*.

Today was September 19, its first day.

Despite the early weekday morning hour, the parents and guardians of those participating in the festival were already flooding the city streets. If Academy City's general board hadn't prohibited outsiders from driving into the city as part of its plan to keep people from seeing too far inside, there would have been pointless traffic jams stretching dozens of kilometers all over. Therefore, it was faster to go on foot. To deal with the pedestrian congestion, the city had ramped up its train and subway services. They set up self-driving buses, too; this was all so much more than usual that they were experiencing an extreme shortage of *actual* drivers.

No matter where you looked, it was like a big train station platform at rush hour. It just went to show how big the Daihasei Festival really was.

These were some of the few days of the year Academy City was open to outsiders, all so others could see its espers and their theatrical supernatural abilities as they competed ruthlessly against one another. The actual events of

the competition were the same as any old-school athletic festival, but seeing the students' mysterious "powers" up close was quite stimulating and fascinating for those not from the city, who may have known about them for their fame on television but had never actually witnessed them in person.

So.

A couple, one man and one woman, was walking through the near-futuristic city.

"Oh, honey, look! No matter how many times we come here, Academy City is so overwhelming. It's like the worlds we drew with our crayons as kids have come to life. If only they had trains that ran through tubes and hoverboards! Then it would be perfect…"

That was Touya Kamijou, a certain boy's father. He wore plain slacks and a dress shirt with its sleeves rolled up to his shoulders. He wore a necktie that seemed more a gift than a thing someone would actually use, and the soles of his well-worn leather shoes padded along, sounding pathetic on the pavement.

A reply came.

"Oh my, oh my. I don't think this is up to the standards of the near future that I imagine. There are no giant space battleships or humanoid weapons split up into a federation and an empire fighting, firing red and blue laser beams at each other, making *pew pew* noises even though they're in space, are there? And I'd like to see the sabers that look like fluorescent lights."

That was Shiina Kamijou, a certain boy's mother. She looked twice as young as Touya, and her apparel made the two of them seem poorly matched as they walked together. She wore a long dress that went down to her ankles, made of delicate silk or perhaps another thin, smooth fabric. Over that, she wore a relaxed cardigan. There was a wicker basket hanging from her arm, perhaps with their lunch inside. The wide-brimmed hat on her head brought it all together in quite a classy fashion statement.

Though the two were married, they looked more like a noble daughter and her hired driver. Right now, they were walking leisurely toward the opening ceremony venue where their son would be participating.

“Honey, I don’t think you can call that exactly *near future*. That’s much further off. They apparently have pyro-blades here…Well, let’s stop with all the talk of weapons, yes? We have a nice, er, atmosphere going. It wouldn’t be proper to break it.”

They looked up to the sky and saw smoky white fireworks popping in the air. The helicopters flitting about probably belonged to the mass media. The Daihasei Festival was open to the public, and the city allowed the media to broadcast it on television. Commentary booths were present at the stadiums and fields, and temporary outdoor studios had been set up all around the city. The viewership rivaled even the World Cup’s; Touya, ever the businessman, imagined that the media was working itself to the bone.

Then somebody crossed in front of them.

It was a young girl wearing a maid outfit, perched atop an oil drum–shaped security robot. She carried a tray at her waist, hooked around her neck, like a baseball stadium vendor. “Ah! Hey! Does anyone want one of Academy City’s famous maid box lunches? Does anyone want one of Ryouran Girls’ Housekeeping Academy’s maid bento—or more specifically a maid-in-training’s bento?”

The couple stood amazed at the intense sales pitch as the maid riding the security robot slid past from right to left without a sound. Despite her “maid bento” comment, the box lunches’ contents looked like regular old Japanese food.

“Oh my, oh my.” Shiina put a hand to her cheek. “Academy City has so many different kinds of schools.”

Touya, too, glanced at the disappearing maid (more specifically, the maid-in-training) as they proceeded. “Well, it’s like a microcosm of every kind of educational institution the world over. They probably have all the knowledge and technology from the home economics schools throughout the world. And how scary is it that a maid walking around the city doesn’t seem out of place at all—Ack, whoa!!” Having let his attention slip, he ran straight into someone.

“Eek! Ah, I’m so sorry for bumping into you!”

Touya looked to see a lady who seemed about college age. She wore a light

gray dress shirt and a pair of long, slender jet-black pants made of a thin material. Their design was simple, but the clothing was high class. He could see her sitting in a company president's seat dressed like that. Still, there was nothing formal about *her*, despite the clothing. As a matter of fact, she looked more like a delinquent being forced to wear it. It was the opposite of Touya, who always went to business dealings with the company fortunes on the line in a lazy suit.

The girl who'd collided with him smiled amicably. "It's so big here that it's easy to get lost. I'm sorry, but would you happen to know where Tokiwadai Middle School is?"

"Right…Ah, wait just a moment." Touya rummaged through his things and took out a pamphlet. Academy City was enormous, and there was a vast number of schools participating, so it was as thick as some overseas travel guides. He gave up on trying to find a map and looked through the index at the end of the pamphlet instead. "*Toki*, *toki*…I don't see it. Tokiwadai Middle School isn't on the list. If there's no introduction for it on the official pamphlet, then maybe that means it's not open to the public?"

"What?! Are you serious? Then where the heck is Mikoto?! I finally managed to get some time off from university for this!"

Is Mikoto her little sister's name? thought Touya as he read, but she suddenly drew near to him and peered at the pages, basically up against his shoulder.

"*To, to, to, toki, toki, toki*…Ack! It's really not here! Crap! Now what?!"

The lady gave a cornered yelp. Had they not already decided on somewhere to meet? This soon before the opening ceremonies, her cell phone could be powered off. Her defenseless cheek nearly collided with Touya's stubble, and her soft hairs tickled his ear. The soft hair had a faintly sweet scent to it. He hastily looked away.

"Oh my, Touya. *This again?*"

"H-honey? Wh-what do you mean?" asked Touya carefully.

Shiina put a hand to her cheek and sighed, sincerely sad. He also thought he saw an evil shadow starting to cross her face. "My word, Touya. Running into a

lady by the roadside, making friends, and getting nice and cozy without even being aware you're doing it. How many times does this make, I wonder? Am I the sillier one for trying to keep count? Oh my, oh my. This will not do. You must be very masochistic to make me this mad, Touya."

Shiina's face was so terrifying that portraits on paper bills would flinch away in fear, but the lady next to Touya didn't notice Shiina change at all. Instead, she kept pulling on his arm, asking, "Hey, do you know where the administrative committee tent is or something? Come on, tell me!"

Touya, meanwhile, was frantically thinking about whether to ignore or accept the situation. *Honey, that's scary! B-but, but it's actually kind of cute seeing you a little jealous! What should my next move be?!*

"Oh my. Isn't that Touma over there?"

With Shiina's attention directed elsewhere now, Touya felt deflated. *I-I'm saved. But why do I feel a little disappointed?* he wondered, looking in the same direction. The lady next to him was still pulling on his arm, looking at the pamphlet.

There was a crowd in front of them, and most of them turned out to be students in gym uniforms. There were slight differences in the uniforms based on what school they were from, but they were all wearing either a red or a white headband.

On the other side of the crowd, he spotted the spiky hair of his familiar child. He was participating in the Daihasei Festival, so he was obviously wearing a uniform of short sleeves and shorts. Next to him was a girl in a different uniform, this one for full-blown track-and-field events: a tank top and shorts. The lady looked up suddenly from the pamphlet Touya was holding out, then pointed at the girl, who had brown hair down to her shoulders, then began to explain. "Oh! There's Mikoto. Thank goodness. I've been so busy with university that we never agreed on a place to meet."

There was a throng of people between them, so the children hadn't noticed their parents yet. Still, the children were talking to each other loudly enough that they could hear them clearly.

"Hey, so which color did you get, anyway? Red or white?"

“Eh? Red, why? Are you on the red team, too?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Oh! I see. So you’re on the red team. Let’s both try our best!”

“Th-then if the r-red team members do some kind of group event, we should _”

“Just kidding! I’m actually on the white team!!”

“…?!”

“Gaze upon this immaculate white headband! It is the symbol of my determination to send every single last one of you, our sworn enemies, to the grave! We would *never* be on the same side. And I don’t care whether you’re a middle school kid or a high school kid! I’ll beat the hell out of all of you and take all the points for myself, so you’d better be ready!!”

“You…You’re insane! I’ll teach you to look down on people younger than you. I could wipe out all the nerds on the white team by myself!!”

“Yeah, but you won’t! In fact, if I lose to you, then I’ll do whatever you say! I don’t care what it is!”

“I…That’s fine by me! I’ll take you on…Whatever I want, huh? All right, then.”

“Oh, that’s just like a *proper* young lady from Tokiwadai! So much unfounded hope despite having no prospects for victory! In exchange, if you lose, you have to do whatever I say!”

“What?! I’d have to…to do whatever you…”

“Oh my, what’s this? Scared now, Miss Misaka? After all that, are you really all bark and no bite, Miss?”

“…Fine, then. I’ll do it! Just don’t come crying to me when you lose!”

“I see, I see. Only people who’ve already given up on winning would say stuff like that!!”

Their family members watched, deathly still, as she replied with a loud *what* and a *biri biri* and weaved electric attacks into the conversation. There must have been a bit of a gap between them and the ideal images their parents had of

them.

Shiina Kamijou placed a hand on her cheek. “Oh my, oh my…So clever with his words, making such an absurd request of a girl of such a tender age. She sure does remind me of someone in particular. Oh my! I’m starting to remember my own school days.”

Touya Kamijou was petrified with shock. “Th-this can’t be. A punishment game? Telling a middle school girl she has to do whatever he wants? What do you want to order her to do, anyway, Touma?!”

The lady next to them made a face. *Is it their fault? Well, I’ll ask Mikoto later. How young—and how inexperienced with the ways of the world…*She sighed and pressed her hand to her forehead.

And that about wraps up how Academy City’s giant coordinated athletic festival, the Daihasei Festival, kicked off its seven days of competition.

CHAPTER 1

Starting Signal Under the Blazing Sun
Commence_Hostilities.

1

St. George's Cathedral in London.

It seemed a little big to be a church yet a little small to be a cathedral. In a way, it seemed to make a point of not standing out. Inside, standing with an air of composure, was the archbishop Laura Stuart, who was for all intents and purposes the leader of the English Puritan Church.

It would be around nine in the morning Japan time, but clocks in England, the standard for the world's time, had just struck midnight. Despite being the capital of the nation, an almost solemn silence hung over the streets, marking the day's end with the arrival of the night's soft darkness and clear air.

All the cathedral's candles had been snuffed. Only Laura remained. She placed a chair in front of a lectern and sat in it. She wore a habit toned pure white, but it was adorned with black, red, green, purple, gold, and silver thread—every color approved for their official clothing. All the hues created a dazzling contrast. To top it all off, she wore over everything the decorative cloth used by high-ranking clergy. It was, so to speak, formal attire.

Crossist society was not unique in this aspect—most cultures could say clothing denoted position and status. Such an explanation might sound rather formal and vague, but school uniforms and chef's hat heights followed the same reasoning. Sisters like Laura, unlike the substantially more ordinary clergy, attended a variety of public events. They needed countless habits to match the season, time, place, ceremony, situation, and intention. One, for example, might be a purposely lower-ranking outfit for welcoming certain guests, and another might be a purposely higher-ranking outfit to display anger when attending a

meeting or conference. The etiquette surrounding clothing was complex and frustrating on many levels.

We are all equal as brothers and sisters, children of the Lord…and yet we still have this. The archbishop couldn't help but sniff at the terms *position* and *rank*. Still, such minor matters of etiquette were but a trifle for Laura. Mere cloth scraps could not overshadow her physical splendor.

The most striking thing about her was her long golden hair, which was two-and-a-half times her height in length. Normally she used silver hair clips to tie it together, but her hair was down at the moment. The innumerable strands hung loosely, flowing down from her shoulders to fan out in front of her. The loose ends crawled across the floor.

On Laura's lap were combs of gold and silver.

Each had its own tooth length, thickness, and separation that she carefully considered as she picked one up. Then, as though carefully plucking the strings of a harp, she ran the comb meticulously through her long hair, one section at a time. Being that her hair was longer than she was tall, her arms were obviously too short to reach the ends of it. She would slowly pull her hair toward her, comb it, then return it to the floor. Her golden locks were like a seashore, waves breaking and receding.

After she finished combing all her hair, she would use another comb, and then another one when she was done with that—a seemingly endless cycle of events, as though even the order of combs held some great meaning.

The only light shining on her hair was the moonlight coming in from the stained glass windows…

…and the light of the LCD monitor on the lectern.

The monitor and communication setup had been stationed there temporarily by some agency or other that was pro–Academy City. Normally this would have been Stiyl's job, but he wasn't currently in England. Kaori Kanzaki was also learned enough to use a cell phone. Upon asking her about hooking up such a top-of-the-line device, though, she had frozen where she sat, engaging the manual in a staring contest. In the end, she just gave the archbishop a look like an abandoned puppy.

“What exactly are you doing?”

A grating voice came from the monitor. Laura couldn’t tell if it belonged to a man or a woman, to a child or an adult, to a saint or a sinner. She didn’t bother looking; it would just be that “human” hanging upside down in the image anyway.

The “human” was Aleister, the chairman of the Academy City General Board.

Laura, with her heaps of hair coming over her shoulders, spoke quietly. “Can you not tell? I am in the middle of doing my hair. I suppose that normally, a gentleman wouldn’t have the opportunity to see a lady caring for her body as I do now.” She giggled. “Among ladies in twelfth-century England, the utmost virtue was creating *hair of sunshine* by verily burning the sunlight or moonlight into it to change its color. Quite elegant when compared with crude hair dyes, yes, wouldn’t you agree?”

Her voice was proud, but there was no reply from the monitor. She cocked her head a bit, though she still didn’t look at the LCD screen. “Pray tell, what may the problem be? Silence is no answer to a question, indeed?” she asked dubiously.

Still, she received no answer. Finally, just when she thought things were getting suspicious, the heap of machinery opened its mouth to speak. “Well…I have been meaning to say this for quite some time now.”

“Go on.”

“Frankly speaking, the way you speak Japanese is…*strange*. Or else you are making fun of us. Which is it?”

Laura’s movements froze. The comb trembled, caught in her magnificent hair. “I-I-I-I must protest, what dost thou mean by this?! I have no duty to afford courtesy to those who dost not believe in the Lord’s authority! Such a coarse way of speaking is more than enough to give to the likes of you!!”

“I see…Well, if such a…*unique* way of speaking is by your own design, then I will leave it at that. I only thought to let you take a Japanese course if you were sincerely worried about it. I govern a city of scholars, after all.”

“Mgh! I am not worried at all! What foolishness is this— Why should *I* be required to worry so for such an inconvenient language only spoken by a single

country in the Far East?!”

Scritch-scritch cried her comb as she quickly ran it through her hair. With no response from the monitor, the empty cathedral was filled with only the sounds of hair being combed.

After a little while, Aleister spoke, as if to change the subject. “Still, I do wonder why you’re combing your hair in front of a guest. Normally, such a thing should be finished before going to talk to someone.”

Laura’s tone and attitude gradually regained some of its calm—either she liked talking about hair or was just relieved to be off the previous subject. “It all has to do with timing. Normally, a lady would be doing her hair in her bedroom at this late hour of the night. I would thank you to overlook a mere hair-brushing.”

“Hmm, and I suppose the fruits of your labors would be that *hair of sunshine*, as you so eloquently stated earlier. The moonlight bit may be mere superstition, but ultraviolet sunlight can have decolorizing effects. Perhaps you have already seen the hints from the appearance of old books, but I shall give you a warning… You’ll go bald.”

“…That truly was a disgraceful thing to say during diplomatic relations.” Laura turned. Her hair was covering the floor like a carpet, glittering in reflected light from the LCD monitor. It had already taken on a gold and silver sheen after being carefully combed, and now it bore rich reds and blues among it. “Disgraceful,” she said a second time under her breath. “In any event, I do believe you are cognizant of why I might contact you at such an hour, but I would just like to be positive. I do thank you for taking my request at such a poor time.”

“Do not concern yourself with the time difference. I have already started my job by this time.”

“I’m trying to say that it was disgraceful of *me* to interrupt your work hours!” Laura stared at the light reflected in her own hair. “There is a ceremony happening where you are, nay? As the leader, I would expect you to mayhap give a greeting onstage.”

“…Do you think I could go in front of people like this?”

“Heh-heh. Yes, indeed. Your appearance knows not the meaning of courtesy.”

For the first time, Laura looked at the monitor on the lectern. It showed a cylindrical tube filled with red liquid and a person floating upside down in it. The person wore green surgical clothing—certainly not an image to show to others in public, no matter how you thought about it. And above all, the person would retain this form over another millennium (apparently, anyway—Laura didn't understand the finer details). People would obviously start to think it strange if Aleister were to continue appearing in the public eye like that. Of course, there were likely plenty of methods to change one's name or face if desired.

Similarly, Laura Stuart was not of the age her appearance let on. Still, she was more the type to burst out laughing at someone's shortcomings than to fix her own. "Then allow me to continue. Well, I don't have all the time in the world here, so some things I will need to be quick and to the point with."

The face in the monitor exhaled. "The intruder is in Academy City, correct?"

"Indeed." Laura nodded. "I am aware you are currently inviting in general attendees—and that you must loosen your security to do so."

Laura had experience with the same thing. If one were to create a truly impenetrable security system aimed at absolutely protecting VIPs, then during large-scale congregations such as parades or Christmas, mass transit would slow to a crawl, which would have negative effects on the operational schedule itself. They needed a little "play" in the security net so that they wouldn't hold back the entire flow of people.

"A sorcerer has slipped through the gaps and made a move on you. Our information sources have confirmed but two. A high executive in the Roman Orthodox Church and a smuggler in her employ."

"A smuggler…Just to be sure—that means this isn't an operative trying to create conflict or destruction?"

"Yes. The smuggler's name is Oriana Thomson, and her employer is Lidvia Lorenzetti. Their objective, in essence, is a transaction of a certain item." She picked up a paper document next to the monitor on the lectern and waved it pointlessly in front of the camera lens. The letters on it were relatively small, but she was talking to one representing Academy City, user of all kinds of unknown technology. She couldn't say for sure that Aleister was unable to read it. "First,

we have Oriana Thomson. As her name would verily imply, she was born in England and is—or should be—a citizen of Italy. She is the foremost smuggler of the sorcery world, known by the name Route Disturber. Not only can she elude the eyes of would-be-pursuers, she can shake them off even if she's found out."

More precisely, Oriana would do anything to get someone off her trail. Because of that, her movements were entirely random, and even if you laid down a plan from information ahead of time, you'd easily lose sight of her. Oriana Thomson would drop bridges, create oceans of fire, and lay countless traps, setting them up as parting gifts, breaking away from one pursuer after another. The sorcerer had a huge variety of means at her disposal. She was also pretty, a fact she would use every now and then to manipulate emotions.

As one might imagine, considering her place of birth, Oriana had clashed with the English Puritan Church on countless occasions while operating in London. On those occasions, the organization Necessarius tried to track her, but they would frequently find themselves blocked off by what she called her "little friend," which had nothing to do with magic. She wasn't just battle-crazed; she used human walls made of civilians to easily blend in to crowds, too.

"And now on to Lidvia Lorenzetti. An eccentric even within the Roman Orthodox Church, she is also known as the Mardi Gras—in its original sense of Shrove Tuesday, of course. She specializes in missionary work to those society has trouble accepting: a veritable maiden of repentance."

Unlike Oriana, Lidvia was a genuine Roman Orthodox believer, having come straight from the Holy See. Though she held a fairly high position there, people said she lived to spread the teachings of God to those all over the world, and thus she never sought out an actual "seat" for herself. She, too, was a woman who would do anything—if it were for proselytizing. She had once been given silk garments and a platinum staff directly from the pope's hands as a reward for her excellent service, and she hadn't wasted a second in pawning them off and using the money for her travels.

Lidvia gathered many talented people to "save" them or "spread the Word further," and they were all geniuses the likes of which the world had never seen. The most striking fact about Lidvia was that they were all people with problems in human societies, like the perpetrators of atrocious crimes and fanatical

cultists. They were the sorts of people you would think would be executed long before being scouted like this. Her ability to sniff out these people was nothing to make light of. It also meant she was proficient in regulating and controlling these firebrands and loose cannons.

The Roman Orthodox Church was known for putting sinners to death and burning heretics at the stake, but they couldn't attack people who had been officially acknowledged as having turned over a new leaf. For certain higher-ups who hated nonconformists, Lidvia's actions were a thorn in their side. And Laura, archbishop of the English Puritan Church, found her difficult to deal with as well.

Laura could present open opposition if Oriana were clearly training sorcerers, but if she were seen only praying and giving Bibles to the unfortunate, any attempts to obstruct her would just reflect badly on the accuser.

"So in your world, they're quite a pair, then. I wouldn't understand, of course. Who are they attempting to make this transaction with?"

"Unconfirmed, really. At this point, the most suspicious would be Nikolai Tolstoj of the Russian Catholic Church. The person would likely be ranked bishop." Nikolai didn't have the aggressiveness of the Roman Orthodox Church's pagan-eliminating ways, but he was known for his cunning; he was the type to quietly benefit when two other groups were fighting.

"Well then, as for the item the smugglers in question are transporting…Is there some obstacle to telling us what it is?"

"Well, I need to tell you its name and describe its shape, at least, or you will have no way of pursuing it, will you?" Laura took her eyes from the monitor on the lectern and heaved an object on the floor up into her hands, never leaving her seat.

"A sword?"

"A replica. I borrowed it from the British Museum. It's just a look-alike—it has no magical properties."

In Laura's hands was a marble sword. It was around a meter and a half in length, and in width…or, rather, its guard was thirty-five centimeters on either side, for a total of seventy centimeters. It was about ten centimeters thick, and,

of course, it didn't have an edge on it. Only its tip had been roughly sharpened, as though it were a pencil.

"It's called the Stab Sword. I may not be able to fully explain its properties, but it is said to be able to pierce even dragons and pin them to the earth. Its magical value and effects are both enormous. If it were wielded against us, we would all find ourselves in a dilemma. It could embroil all of the United Kingdom in war."

The Stab Sword was a Soul Arm capable of destroying certain "pillars" of the various denominations of the Church with a single stroke. If one aimed for a specific denomination and their "pillars" were destroyed, nearby enemy factions would see the weakened denomination and might attack all at once.

Those "pillars" were the so-called "saints" in the Crossist Church. Well-known among the Crossist community, their combat strength rivaled nuclear weapons. And the Stab Sword could erase their very existence.

"Hmm. I suppose it would be like a tactical weapon in your world." Aleister stared at the sword in question from across the camera. "Could you explain what sort of crisis we might face should it be used in Academy City? Depending on the situation, we may have to redirect or evacuate the civilians in attendance."

"You needn't worry. This weapon can be used only in the world of sorcerers. It won't have any effect if used in your world."

"I see. We might have been able to plan a countermeasure with a more detailed explanation of its mechanisms."

"Oh, it surprises me that those in the world of science could plan against sorcery. I don't suppose you're sheltering any sorcerers on the inside, are you?"

"…"

"…"

Both of them fell silent. Slender, sharp strings of tension stretched all around them, so tight that a single breath could snap them. Still, neither appeared flustered. In fact, it almost felt like they were enjoying this.

Laura spoke first, in a bright voice as if plucking the taut strings with a finger. "Let us leave the pointless reconnaissance to the side. We haven't much time,"

she said with a shake of her head. The carpet of her curls swayed a little. “The most pressing issue is that the deal for this Stab Sword will take place within Academy City.”

“The enemy is likely aware of that. We cannot allow English Puritan sorcerers onto our grounds as an exception.”

If they gave a special exception in the English Puritan Church’s case, other churches and organizations would start asking for permission as well. Not all of them would be on their side. There would surely be those who would use the chance to infiltrate the city and enact all sorts of subversive activities.

The situation was enough of a mess as it was—anyone could imagine how it would escalate if they created more flames. And that was leaving the current Daihasei Festival out of it, too. They would want to avoid as much as possible any chaos while the general populace and mass media were in the city. Accidents and disasters were out of the question.

A similar situation had occurred at the beginning of August when an alchemist commandeered Misawa Cram School. They had invited the English Puritans and Roman Orthodoxy into the city to stop Aureolus Isard’s rampage, but the circumstances were different now. There were a lot of civilians present for the Daihasei Festival who had come from *outside* Academy City. Aleister could be obstinate and say, “We will decide who and how to solve our city’s problems,” but someone could then claim, “There are spectators from our country, so we will protect our citizens,” fanning the flames of chaos even further.

There was a strength disparity between organizations, of course.

Academy City was the head of the science faction and was simply on a different level of power compared to the magic factions and various small-scale groups. Which naturally meant there were large disparities in how influential their voices were, but it also wasn’t a situation where one could force their ways onto others.

If one were to spurn the opinion of a group in the magic faction, a greater power of the magic faction would then use that as a pretext to get involved. Even if one were to force them to yield, *another* even larger organization would cut in. Meanwhile, the problem would start to snowball out of control,

eventually ending in the entire science and magic worlds quarreling with each other.

Of course, the Daihasei Festival was watched by the entire world.

It would probably take less than a day from the start of a crisis before the situation was past the point of no return.

“Still, it would be another problem were one of Academy City to defeat a sorcerer within its walls.”

The science and magic worlds kept to their respective territories, guaranteeing their own interests and responsibilities. Public security forces from Academy City carelessly capturing a sorcerer ran the danger of overstepping those bounds.

“The dullards have certainly thought this through. Both our sides have detected an abnormality, and yet in the situation, neither can carelessly lay a hand on the intruders. Neither of us can play our hands. Which means they can relax and concentrate on the deal.”

“But we cannot fold just because we can’t play our hands.” Laura stood up. Her too-long hair stayed on the floor; it would take more than that to stir so much mass. The combs of gold and silver in her lap fell off, but she didn’t even spare them a glance. “I understand that you are inviting the general populace inside. You would surely welcome one going there for nothing more than a vacation, no?” Laura suggested seriously, smirking at the monitor.

“Hmm. Even disguised as a vacation, having a group made up of only English Puritan members would still be an issue. If it was seen as a collective action planned and executed by a single party, others might understandably take that as an organization having successfully infiltrated Academy City and conducting operations freely. But if we were to restrict it to a single individual…and if it happened to be an old friend of someone living in Academy City, we may be able to pull the wool over their eyes,” said Aleister pleasantly and proudly.

And then, Aleister added, “…And that would mean we have no choice but to appoint that boy as his travel guide.”

2

It was ten thirty. The opening ceremonies had finally ended.

“Damn, it’s hot…”

The average high school student Touma Kamijou was standing in a soccer stadium. Apparently the facility belonged to an athletics school that put a lot of oomph into their club activities. It was so blazing hot that the artificial, synthetic resin grass might have melted, but nevertheless the procession of boys and girls in all kinds of gym clothing passed through the exit, then split up into small groups and dispersed.

There were a little more than 1.8 million participants in the Daihasei Festival. The stadium was to professional specifications, but it was impossible to fit everyone in there. And that’s why the opening ceremonies had been held in more than three hundred places at once.

“…But I still think this city has too many principals,” Kamijou muttered, exhausted. The “little stories” principals had were always long, and they had to sit through many of them in this blazing heat. For various reasons, Kamijou was an amnesiac, but he felt like he was experiencing a second life midway through the ceremony. Of course, the General Board carefully selected which principals would speak. Otherwise, the entire first day of the competition would be over by the time every school’s principal got done talking.

A look around revealed students of all grade levels who were participating in the Daihasei Festival, but most of them seemed to feel about the same as Kamijou. They were all generally in a short-sleeved shirt and shorts. Depending on the school, some might be wearing leggings or track-and-field tank tops. The more unique schools might have been wearing *dogi* uniforms for martial arts such as aikido, or camo-patterned cargo pants, or even body armor (the un-powered kind) made from special materials. Basically, anything went. The one common thread was that every student was wearing either a red or a white headband on their forehead.

The Daihasei Festival was generally a competition between schools; wins and losses would add and subtract points for the school. The schools were then split between a red team and a white team, and the total number of victories for each team would combine, and points would be added to each individual school

based on that. Red versus white, school versus school: Everything combined would form a total score, and each school would be ranked in the very end by their final point tally.

Kamijou and Mikoto's pre–opening ceremony argument about who would win and who would lose was based on this system. Whichever one of their schools ended up higher in the standings of all the schools would be declared the winner. Or, in her words: "J-just watch…! You're going to regret making the punishment game doing whatever the winner wants!!"

"…It's a bit late, but I wonder what she'll do to me. W-wait. She isn't going to have us play a game of catch with her Railgun (with me being the catcher) until the sun goes down, right?! I don't even want to say the word *catcher* anymore!!"

The students around him at the stadium exit gave him strange looks as he shouted despite himself. He snapped out of it and snuck away from the bus roundabout in front of the stadium.

Still, well…

Until now, Kamijou had been trembling in fear at his terrible vision of the future, but all he had to do was not lose, right? Sure, she was from an elite school, but it was only a middle school—and an all-girls' school, at that. On top of that, even though abilities were allowed in the games, they were (or should've been) a simple extension of gym class. Honestly, he doubted young ladies raised with such love and care could compete with a team of absurdly sweaty high school kids in the prime of manhood. And even if he lost directly to Tokiwadai in one game, there was still a way. As long as his school beat the other schools besides them, they could cover the difference.

"Touma!"

Suddenly the one beside him addressed him.

He looked to see a girl there, unique among the gym-uniformed masses in a pure white habit lined with embroidery of gold thread. Her name was Index. The English girl had silver hair, green eyes, and a slender frame, but she also possessed perfect recall, which she'd used to store 103,000 magical grimoires in her memory. Frankly, she was even more dangerous than an unskilled esper.

Index slumped, clutching a small calico to her chest with both hands. “Touma… I think I’m hungry.”

“Already?! It’s still morning! You just ate breakfast two hours ago!!”

“Mgh…I know, but there’s all these indescribable smells coming from everywhere!” As she spoke, the cat’s nose perked up and it mewed happily.

Kamijou decided to sniff around himself to be sure. His nose caught the faint, particular smell of soy sauce and mayonnaise being cooked. He looked windward and saw a whole street lined with the kind of stalls selling homemade food you would see at a festival.

Despite the breadth of the athletic competition, the students wouldn’t all be confined to events at every waking hour of the day. As long as they got to the stadiums they needed to go to at the times they needed to be there, they were free to roam. They could go root for other schools, look around for souvenirs with family members, or stand in a convenience store and read manga without any issues.

The schools of culinary arts and home economics like the one Maika Tsuchimikado attended were setting up their stalls and booths and working as fervently as they could to bring in a little extra income. There weren’t actually many events where every single student in a school participated at once. They’d be split up based on academic year and how the event worked, so someone would always be free. The ones running the booths were probably supposed to be cheering on their own schools right now, but apparently the closing ceremonies would be more bombastic if they earned some money at the stalls. More than 1.8 million students’ families were here; the potential for big profits was clearly present.

“Ahh, mmm…Japan’s culinary culture is like one big tempting ball of food!” said the nun holding the cat suddenly. Index would rush to get her hands on any food put in front of her. Even just the distant scents would make her start to drool if too much time passed. Kamijou almost felt like giving her a pat on the back for managing not to launch into a desperate attack on the food stands.

“Right…You’re free all day, so when I get some time later, we can walk around together.”

Index nodded in agreement, but then froze. *"…Later?"*

"Yeah. The first event's about to start, and I need to get over there. Here, take this pamphlet. I marked the stadium seats for the events I'll be in today. Let's get going!"

"Wahh, nooo! Why are you acting so businesslike today, Touma?"

Index cried something out, but he was already running a little late. He wanted to visit at least one or two booths, but if he released the hungry girl into the wild, that wouldn't be nearly enough. He was sure of it; she wouldn't be satisfied until they visited every single booth along that street.

He caught Maika as she went by selling food and bought one of her maid bento (*1,200 yen? That's steep…*) after haggling it down to half price, pushed it into Index's arms, and headed off for the stadium with her. The maid lunch happened to have completely ordinary Japanese foods in it. *That's it? For that price?* he complained. Maika had this to say on the matter:

"Japan is the world capital of bento! They don't even have this tradition in most other countries. In English-speaking countries they just wrap the whole meal into the word *lunch* and eat anything. Biscuits are pretty much the only portable foods in western civilization, which is why I went all in on Japanese cuisine. And you keep saying how expensive it is, but it was just made for the beginning of the festivities and meant for those who came to watch, so it's a high-grade product! I've already reduced it nearly ten times from what an udon meal would cost given the occasion. In fact, I think it's proper tradition to use only the best ingredients and make these Daihasei Festival–specific bento by hand."

None of that really made any sense, but it all seemed to be logical to her. With the maid bento still in one hand, he headed for his high school's campus. He really wanted to go with Index all the way to the audience seats, but the competitors and audience used different entrances. They parted ways, and he headed over to the competitors' entrance. Their campus was still being set up at the moment, and a few teachers were spraying water with hoses here and there to keep the dust from whipping up.

An autonomous advertisement balloon was hovering in the blue sky, and the

uniquely thin screen hanging vertically from it read, District 7 High School Section —Event 1—Pole Topple. 00:10:23 remaining until the game begins.

I don't know what Misaka's gonna make me do if we lose to Tokiwadai Middle School in the overall rankings, so let's get things started with a bang and rack up some points!

The Daihasei Festival took place over seven days, so your pace throughout the week was really important for final placement. It depended on your strategy, and there were a few different things you could do. You could try to shoot ahead at the start with a lot of points, or you could save your stamina for the latter half and overtake the exhausted schools.

Kamijou had amnesia, so this would be his first time experiencing the event firsthand. Still, unless you were a student from a pretty good sports school, nobody could calmly think through the ranking situation *and* maintain stamina. Sure, they all had special powers, but they were students at heart. They were going to be emotionally affected by how the events turned out. Even if there was still a theoretical chance at victory, being behind by a significant margin would break their spirits and ruin chances of a comeback.

Kamijou preferred to put in the immediate effort. *Come to think of it, our preparation was one big chain of nonsense with my class. Maybe the whole school was like that. Well, I'm sure they're all pumped. None of them likes to lose. I'm actually more worried about what problems they'll cause while trying to win.*

With hope brimming in his heart over the useless solidarity his class had, he strode into the competitors' waiting area on the side of the campus and marched into the circle of his classmates.

And then, Blue Hair, who seemed like he'd be all for crazy festivals like this, turned toward him and said:

"Uuuggghhh…I don't feel like doing this…"

Kamijou found himself splendidly fallen headfirst on the ground.

From his new vantage point, he looked around. The rest of his classmates looked about the same. They all seemed a step away from having sunstroke. "H-

hey, wait a minute, everyone. Why are we already on our final day of exhaustion before the first event's even started?" asked Kamijou, shivering to himself.

Blue Hair whipped around. "Eh? Well, I was having so much fun last night that I didn't get a wink of sleep! And before the opening ceremonies, we were all fighting over what strategy we should use to beat the other schools, and now our stamina is almost zero!!"

"All of you?! Every single one of you—haven't you ever heard of putting the cart before the horse?! Anyway, congratulations, Himegami! I am *so glad* you're blending in with the rest of the class!!"

He was referring to Aisa Himegami, who was standing a short distance away. Fair-skinned with black hair down to her waist, she had a unique ability called Deep Blood—for slaying vampires. A cross hung around her neck, hidden against her chest in the short-sleeved uniform she wore. She had just transferred into Kamijou's class at the beginning of the month.

Her long black hair was very Japanese as it swayed in the wind, although the style seemed to be more out of the ordinary these days. "School events," she said curtly. "That's all they are. We don't have personal trainers. Or coaches."

"Oh, is *that* all they are?!" *We're gonna lose for sure!* thought Kamijou, clutching his head in despair.

Then, as if to reward him for his efforts: "Nya. No reason for you to lose hope, Kammy. I mean, the entrance ceremony was fifteen principals comboing us with their speeches. And then a raging hurricane of *fifty* short celebratory messages. I give you credit for getting through all that…"

That was Motoharu Tsuchimikado—a multiple-organization spy well-versed in both magic and science. His short blond hair was spiked up, he wore lightly tinted sunglasses, and golden accessories jingled around his neck. The short sleeves and shorts of his uniform clashed terribly with the rest of him.

"E-even our two fitness idiots are like this…N-no, wait, if our opponents are just as worn out, then we still have a chance!!" cried Kamijou, clinging to one last hope.

"Won't happen, Kammy! Apparently we're up against some elite private sports

school.”

“Gyaaaahhhh!” Kamijou buried his head in the dirt. He was already imagining the hellscapes Mikoto Misaka would have in store for him after he lost. As goose bumps spread to his whole body, one of the girls in the class arrived, late.

“…Wh-what is this? Why is everyone in such low spirits?!”

“Huh?” Kamijou looked up, still on the ground.

Like his other classmates, she was wearing short sleeves and shorts. But she also had a thin parka around her shoulders. On the parka’s breast was written Daihasei Festival Administrative Committee—High School Division. The same thing was probably on the back, too. She was tall compared to the class, and she looked good, too. It took only a glance to see her chest swelling under her uniform T-shirt, he thought in an offhanded way. Her black hair was parted so that it would fall over her ears, exposing most of her forehead.

Seiri Fukiyose.

Also known as the brick wall: pretty but not the least bit sexy.

As she looked over the class in a daze, her eyes finally fell on Kamijou, who was on the ground by himself. “Hah! Don’t tell me your excessive listlessness has infected the other students, Kamijou…How do you plan on fixing this?!”

“Huh? Wait, this isn’t my fault anyway! I just got here a minute ago!”

“So that’s why everyone looks so tired—because you were late?”

“You really want this to be my fault, don’t you?! Besides, you got here later than me!”

“I was doing administrative committee work, stupid!”

Everyone’s so quick to treat me like an idiot! Kamijou nearly started crying. “Just leave me alone already! I can’t go on. I’ve come face-to-face with an unlucky, unfortunate reality, and in my current state, I am incapable of standing up!!”

“How undisciplined. You’re in a state of minor anemia due to skipping breakfast rather than the psychogenic sort. If you get some water and minerals in you, you’ll be fine, so have a sports drink already and stand the heck up,

Touma Kamijou!”

With a clatter, Fukiyose whipped out a few varieties of small plastic bottles from her parka pocket.

“Ahhh! Your logic would make only health-goods maniacs happy! And in your case it’s not water or minerals, it’s calcium you lack, or am I just imagining it?!”

“What are you saying? The fish I had for breakfast gave me enough of that!” Fukiyose glared at him sharply. “I hate people who give up on controlling their life for dumb reasons like they’re unlucky or unfortunate. If you act lazy, everyone else isn’t going to want to do anything. So stand up straight—for all our sakes!”

Kamijou had to flinch away from Seiri Fukiyose’s constant stream of nagging. But as he backed off, the administrative committee member closed in on him even more. He tried to go back even farther, but a flower bed was in the way.

And then, jubilant expressions appeared on his classmates’ faces.

“Wh-whoa. Fukiyose, you’re amazing! You’re the perfect shield against the Kamijou factor!”

“And normally girls would just go, *O-oh, Kamijou, are you all right?* too!”

“And he’d be complaining about his rotten luck or whatever when he’d actually be in complete control of the perfect situation!!”

“Our hope and the hope of all humanity. We may be able to overturn Kammy if we study Seiri Fukiyose!!”

What kind of person do they think I am?! Kamijou retreated, exhausted.

And then…

…suddenly, his foot bumped into something with a little *squish* sound. It was one of the rubber hoses for sprinkling water. The sprinklers were for keeping the sand and dust to a minimum before the event (though they couldn’t do the job perfectly).

Farther away, a male teacher working on-campus muttered “Hm?” confusedly, staring at the hose that water wasn’t coming out of anymore.

That moment…

The water that Kamijou's foot was holding back burst out. The hose connected to the sprinkler faucet buried underground started swinging around wildly, raining tap water all over the place.

The one closest to the faucet was…

"F-Fukiyoseeeee?! Damn you, Kamijou factor! She was our final stronghold!!"

"It's over. As straitlaced as she is, interfering with the Kamijou factor only makes her another victim—of a wet T-shirt fiasco…"

"And then it turns out she actually has on pretty cute underwear, and the usual romantic comedy begins…"

"Our hopelessness and the hopelessness of all humanity…Wait, if Fukiyose can't do it, then who the hell can?!"

Seriously, what kind of person do you think I am?! And seriously, Seiri Fukiyose, I'm so sorry! Kamijou alternated between being mad and apologizing to her. Now that she was soaking wet, her gym uniform was sticking tightly to her skin, revealing both her skin and her underwear. It didn't quite fit her image, the yellow and orange checkers, the extremely cute design her underwear had. Fukiyose, however, never changed her expression.

"…Something to say?"

Not at all!! Kamijou immediately bowed in apology. With a *hmph*, she looked away and closed up the front of her parka, then produced a paper milk carton and began to slurp milk out of a straw. She was ingesting more calcium to calm her own anger.

The male students nearby started using their thumbs to plug up the sprinkler faucets and shoot the water like a laser cannon at other people. They were already utterly exhausted and actually pretty aware of the fact that Fukiyose was soaked, but they seemed to be letting out their gentlemanly mentality to try and show her that they didn't mind and it was okay. They looked innocent, but as they got further into the crazy water game, it was clear their eyes weren't smiling.

Kamijou watched them in a daze. Teamwork wasn't even in his classmates' vocabulary. *N-no one's gonna be able to play the pole-topple game like this!! Maybe it's already over for real. This class is a mess in a lot of ways.*

He wandered over to the wall of the gymnasium where the competitors' entrance was, and he happened to overhear a man and woman speaking to each other. They were hidden in the shadow of the gymnasium, arguing.

"…That…absolutely——not!"

"…Absurd——it's clear that…is it not?"

What now…? Kamijou pressed himself against the gymnasium wall and poked his head around the corner to see.

In the shadows of the back of the gymnasium, he saw his class's homeroom teacher, Komoe Tsukuyomi. She was 135 centimeters tall and no one would bat an eye if she were wearing a third grader's backpack. Today she wore a short, pleated white skirt and a light green tank top—sort of like a cheerleading uniform. Was it so she could cheer them on?

Facing her was a man he didn't know. Maybe it was a teacher from a different school. Even the faculty changed into store-bought jerseys for the duration of the Daihasei Festival, but for some reason, he was wearing a close-fitting suit and tie.

Miss Komoe and the male teacher were arguing.

Actually, it was more like Miss Komoe was on the receiving end of the male teacher's disdainful scorning.

"I already said I'll admit that our facilities and classes aren't perfect! But that's our fault—the students have nothing to do with it!"

Miss Komoe was waving her arms around while shouting, but the male teacher didn't pay it any mind. "Hah. Your facilities are imperfect because your students are of low quality, aren't they? The General Board gives monetary bonuses to schools that deliver. Heh. Of course, a school that produces a constant stream of dropouts would never even get in an application. Yes, Miss Komoe, I've heard. Your final first-semester ability measurements were horrible, weren't they? It must be such a pain to have to deal with such failures."

“Th-there is no success or failure when it comes to the students! Only their individuality! Everyone is working as hard as they can! How…how can we, as teachers, even think about abandoning them for our own convenience?!”

“Is that an excuse to hide your own incompetence? Ha-ha-ha. What a fanciful viewpoint that is. Shall I destroy it with facts? The elite class I’ve been in charge of will beat your dropouts into the dust. Yes, the first event is the pole topple, right? Well, I should advise you as the representative of the opposing school to put in a word with the prep committee so that you can keep the number of wounded to a minimum.”

“Wha…?”

“You caused me a great deal of embarrassment at the last meeting—I’ll be paying that back now. In a stadium broadcasting to the entire world. I do intend to have mercy, but I don’t know what will happen if your trashy failures are too weak for even that. Ha-ha-ha,” he laughed as he walked away.

So he’s from the school we’re up against? Kamijou thought he had the gist of it. He was Level Zero already, so being called a failure or a dropout honestly didn’t do very much damage at this point, but…

“…You’re wrong,” muttered Miss Komoe to herself suddenly.

All alone—to nobody—with her head down—and voice shaking.

“You’re not failures, right, everyone…?”

Her already small shoulders seemed to shrink down even further.

As if to say all that harassment had happened because of some failing of hers.

She looked up to the sky and stopped, as if staring at something.

“____”

Kamijou stayed quiet for a moment.

Then he turned around. His classmates were all standing behind him silently.

Touma Kamijou spoke to them and to confirm just one thing.

“Right, so, everyone! You heard that, didn’t you? You’ve all been complaining about being tired or not feeling like doing anything…”

He shut one eye.

"…but I'll ask you one more time. Are you *still* not up for this?"

3

Mikoto Misaka was in the student seating of the audience.

Unlike the regular audience seats, there was no overhang to block the sunlight. There was just a blue sheet laid out on the ground, without even seats. *It's like a flower-viewing picnic*, thought Mikoto with a sigh. It was primitive, wild—but that actually made it feel fresh.

Considering her schedule of events she was participating in, watching Kamijou's class's event all the way through was relatively dangerous. She couldn't keep her curiosity at bay, though, so here she was. No one else was wearing the designated gym clothes of Tokiwadai Middle School, of course.

*I don't think they could possibly beat our school, though…*She sighed to herself. Tokiwadai was an elite school that valued practical ability above all else, as could be seen from its two Level Five students, seven Level Fours, and all the rest being Level Threes. Another school had scraped by them at the Daihasei Festival last year, placing them in second, but that was another one of the top five schools in the city, Nagatenjouki Academy. In reality, these "top five" schools were the ones vying for victory every year. If anyone overturned that, they would probably become one of the top five.

Everyone in Academy City would have known this, so why would he have challenged her to something so reckless? She didn't know. She thought for a moment and decided the idiot wasn't actually trying to win.

*But…*There could always be a surprise upset. One that ignored everything, including the objective ratings of Level Zero and Level Five. Like the time he demolished Academy City's strongest Level Five with only his right fist…When he clenched his teeth and got back to his feet again and again for her sake…

Her thoughts started to blank out a little. *Ack, no, stop! What am I blushing for all of a sudden?!*

She fanned her reddened face with her paper *uchiwa* fan. *Flap flap flap flap!!*

She shook her head—it was a good thing nobody from her school was there to see her like this.

But then she looked…

…and right next to her was a silver-haired girl in nun garb lying facedown on the ground.

“?!”

Mikoto’s shoulders gave a jerk. This must have been the girl who was with that idiot on the first day of school. He called her Index—was that a nickname? It certainly didn’t sound like an *actual* name. She wondered what the girl was doing here, but an answer came to her a moment later. She must have been here to cheer him on.

She was holding a pair of chopsticks in her right fist, and there was an emptied bento box nearby. Mikoto wondered if it was the school lunch Maika Tsuchimikado was going around selling. As the girl lay on the ground, she began to speak.

“…I…I’m hungry…”

“You literally *just* got here and ate that bento!!” shouted Mikoto on reflex. Then she revised her thinking—what if she didn’t seem exhausted because of an empty stomach but because of heat stroke? She took a sports drink in a plastic bottle from the sheet in front of her and handed it to the girl. Index immediately shot up and managed to get halfway through, saying “Thank you” before the contents of the bottle were empty. And then, not a moment later, she fell limp again.

“…I think filling an empty tummy with a drink is too drastic a strategy…”

“I guess you really are hungry…” Mikoto put a hand to her forehead and sighed. A calico cat slipped out from between the lying Index and the ground, seeming to say, *Oh, hello there, young lady. I see she’s caused you some trouble. Hm?…Well, now. This doesn’t seem quite right*. The cat’s eyes darted around.

Mikoto’s ability was called Railgun—she was a superpowerful electricity user. She constantly emitted a weak electromagnetic field even if she didn’t want to, so animals tended not to like her very much.

She stared at the listless sister in white. “Hey, you. Did you see *him* today? Did he seem strange at all to you?”

“Hm? Him? You mean Touma? He seemed the same as always…”

Mikoto nearly burst out with, *Are you two together all the time?* but thought better of it. If he wasn’t particularly less energetic, then maybe that meant he wasn’t too caught up over winning? *That means our school will win anyway, so… Wait, what should I do if we win?* She thought for a moment, then shook her head very hard.

The collapsed girl looked at her askance. “Hey, Short Hair.”

“…That’s how you talk to someone who shared her drink with you?”

“Hey, Generous Short Hair.”

“That doesn’t make it a whole lot better, you know!!” she shouted, one of her eyebrows twitching.

The sister didn’t seem to take notice of it. “What are you doing here, Short Hair?”

“Huh? Wh-what? Well, I mean, I’m…”

“Are you rooting for Touma?”

“Wha, uh, that’s ridiculous! Why would I be here rooting for that guy, anyway?”

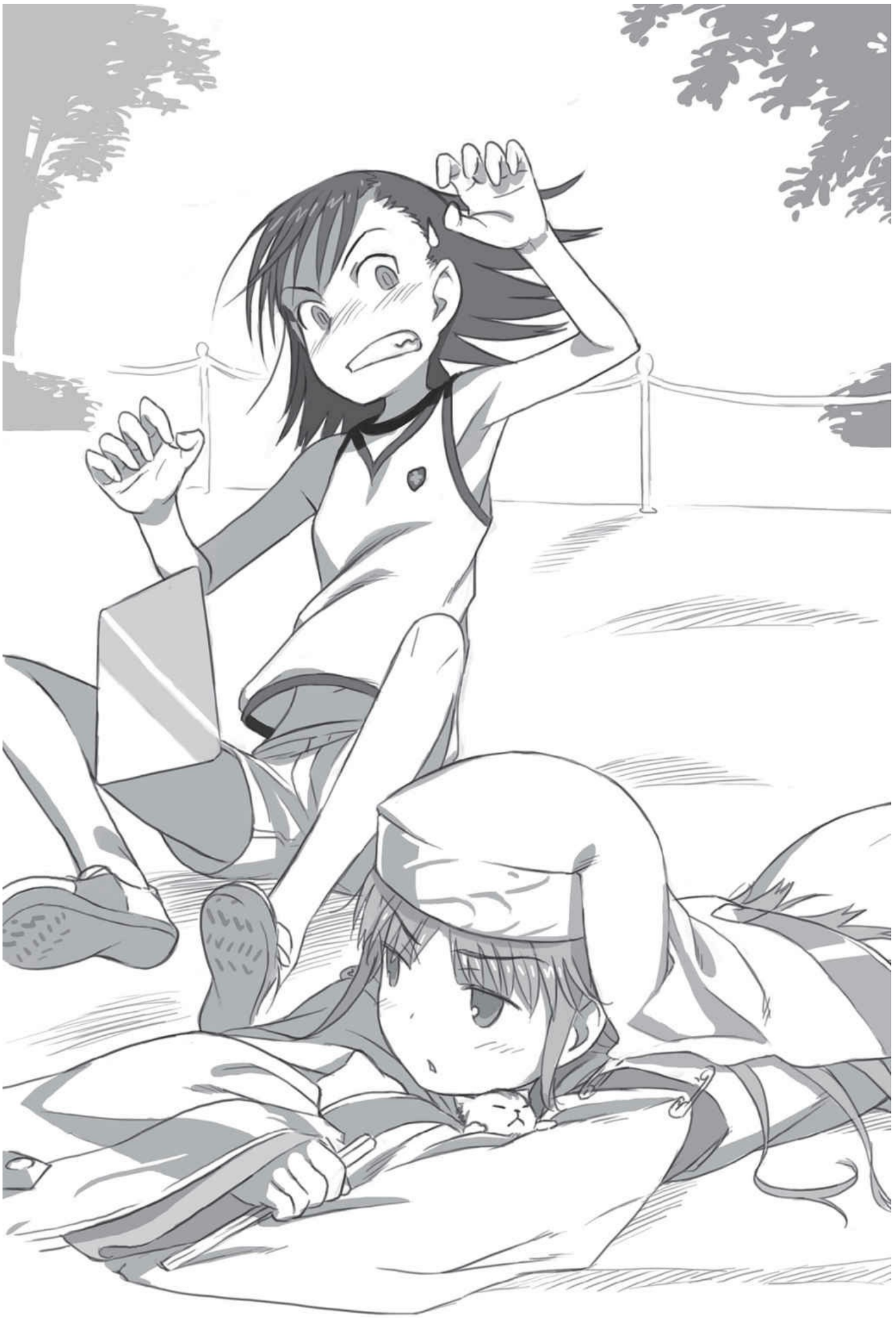
“Is that so?” said the girl in white, not pursuing the topic. Mikoto started *flap-flap-flapping* her fan on her face a lot faster.

Then the school’s PA system came on and announced that the players were entering.

The first event was the pole topple—two opposing teams had their own seven-meter-tall pole. The goal was to try and topple the opposing team’s pole while protecting their own, apparently. A crackling voice came over the speakers to explain that high school freshmen would be the ones taking part in the event.

There were TV crews here, but it was basically just a school athletic meet. The commentary for the TV stations was being broadcast from somewhere else, so it

didn’t look too out of place. Of course, just the fact that people were watching on TV made a huge difference in the place’s mood and atmosphere. It was obviously impossible to do a close-up on every single one of the 1.8 million students, but some still found it nerve-racking.



Despite the insanity of the students' cheering, strangely enough, she felt a kind of calm, a quiet masking tension, inside her. That was the moment she fully realized this was a public, worldwide event.

Still…

"I-I'm…I'm so hungry…"

The sister collapsed facedown on the ground mercilessly shattered the tense mood. She looked so pathetic that Mikoto took a portable stamina ration shaped like a cookie (and chocolate-flavored) and held it out for Index. The cheerless sister brought up only her head and opened her little mouth. When Mikoto held the ration in her fingertips at her mouth, surprisingly, she started eating it obediently.

Still, I guess that idiot wouldn't be nervous about it…In fact, I'm more worried about him completely skipping all this like it doesn't matter.

Then, prompted by the school broadcast, she casually looked over to the field. The team opposing Kamijou's was from an elite school with a heavy emphasis on sports, and they looked the part—she could practically smell their expertise from their simple warm-up stretches. They had tense countenances, like coiled springs; they seemed used to public matches.

Each class gathered at its own end of the campus and began to stand up their poles. *This'll be a disaster if it's a straight fight*, thought Mikoto, shaking her head and looking over at Kamijou's class. As far as the pamphlet told her, his school wasn't a prep school or anything. It was just a completely normal, featureless school—*or so she thought*.

What she saw then were true warriors.

I…What? Mikoto doubted her eyes.

Despite the oddly intimidating air coming from their group, they didn't engage in any jeering or trash talk. Instead, they silently formed a line on their side of the campus, Touma Kamijou at its center. This wasn't just pole-toppling—it was like they were lining up for a medieval battle. The poles on either side to be toppled looked like soldiers' spears or something. This wasn't the kind of tension that came from knowing cameras were trained on you. The only things they were

seeing right now were clearly their own army and the enemy one.

Grrrrrrrrrr, came a strange sound from them. Their supernatural powers numbered in the hundreds, and their side effects were clashing with one another, causing the air to vibrate.

What…? The altogether bizarre tension almost made Mikoto cry out. *What the heck is with that determination?! He uses that stupid charisma for stupid stuff like this, too?! H-he can't seriously be planning to win, can he?! Are you that set on beating me?! What the heck could you possibly want to make me do?!*

This was all because their whole contingent had found out about the episode with Miss Komoe, but there was no way Mikoto would have known that.

Her face paled as the game-beginning announcement came. With the enemy forces baffled by the gap in their mind-sets and with a cloud of dust in their wakes, Kamijou and the rest of the warriors charged the enemy lines.

4

Those taking part in the pole-topple game naturally split into two groups: one to stand up their own pole and support it and one to drag the opponent's pole to the ground.

Kamijou chose the latter option.

So as soon as the match-starting signal came out, he began running straight toward the enemy line.

"Ooooooooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

As he ran, he roared.

One may think it a mere single game in an athletic meet…but this was Academy City, where most of the students were espers who had awakened to some sort of natural power. And now a hundred of those espers were clashing. Nobody knew what would start flying around—fire, water, earth, wind, lightning, ice, or any number of other things—and that made both enthusiasm and tension far above the norm.

About eighty meters lay between the two enemy camps. From the straight,

horizontal enemy line sparked a succession of lights. They looked like camera flashes from the audience, but they weren't. The students were firing long-range esper attacks—probably explosive bursts made with fire or explosion-type abilities. In addition, they would be covering them by using pressurization-type abilities to make tiny invisible walls that created their bullet shapes. This creation process meant the transparent "shells" of the explosive bullets changed how light refracted through the distorted air; they threw back the light like sunlight hitting a transparent balloon. Multiple espers cooperating to create a single kind of attack was another thing you would probably only ever see at the Daihasei Festival.

Kamijou figured offhand that the pressurized bullet shells would come off and release the explosive pressure within them, sending shock waves in all directions. As the dozens of shots were fired at him, a huge number of spears made of sand were coming from his allies to meet them and overtaking him as he ran. These were telekinetic attacks. The "power" had no original color or shape, but the sand particles in the air reacted to the invisible force—like iron filings aligning with a magnetic field.

The explosive bullets and telekinetic spears collided halfway between each team and exploded. There was a string of delighted shrieks and squeals from the stands as the unexpected wind forces hit them like they were riding a roller coaster.

Well…I guess it's a lot more fun to watch!! Flinching a bit from the sounds of the explosions, Kamijou pressed onward.

The enemy school seemed to be filled with sports experts and clearly put a lot into ability development. At least these attacks weren't as bad as Railgun's or Accelerator's—those two could definitely kill you in one hit—but they were still scary anyway. Kamijou's right hand was loaded with a power called the Imagine Breaker. It was a fantastic ability, one that could nullify any sorcery, any supernatural power, even divine miracles, with a single touch…but in the end, it was in only his right hand. He couldn't completely defend against abilities coming at him from all directions like this.

As he mulled over that, still running at the enemy lines, he saw someone running alongside him. It was Blue Hair. "Let's do it, Kami. Those rotten, high-

and-mighty elitists—just *feel* their aura of handsomeness and good looks. Watch as I, the comedic mastermind, smash them all into a million pieces! Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

A few explosive bullets that their return fire missed came rushing at them, but Blue Hair laughed and danced around them like a ballerina, dodging every bullet with time to spare.

The teams were about twenty meters apart now. They couldn't risk looking away, but Kamijou got in a retort at Blue Hair, running beside him, anyway. "Hey, what on earth are you so happy about?"

"Ehh?! Kami, it's love—love, I tell you!" he replied, thick with his fake accent. "These athletic girls, lively, sweating, crying, their fleeting hearts weaving a sadistic form of love for a national television network—nay, for a multinational broadcast! Their love will do anything to achieve its goal, and I would never turn it away to open up a harem route!!"

He continued laughing uproariously, and as his spirits heightened, his movements grew even faster.

"Hey, uh…Is that angry guy with the crew cut part of that love? Look at how red he is—that's some pretty intense pillow talk, eh?"

"You're such a joker— Wait, gyaaaaaaaaaah?!"

Thanks to Kamijou's calm notification, Blue Hair realized what the "pillow talk" really was and froze in place. A second later, an explosive bullet sent him hurtling backward. Kamijou looked back, startled, but one of their allies had caught him in the air with their invisible telekinetic force.

Cheers and applause erupted from the audience seats.

Holy shit, those things are strong. I'll pass on the carnival ride, thanks! And now the audience is into it because they think this *is what the Daihasei Festival is for!!* He took his eyes off the flying Blue Hair and looked in front of him again.

There was the enemy team. About ten meters before they collided now. Touma Kamijou quietly clenched his right hand into a fist.

A moment later, he dove straight into the enemy ranks.

5

The story ended with Kamijou's class winning the game.

They were confident that a straight-up battle would end in total defeat, so right before the two teams clashed, Kamijou's class fired all the abilities at their disposal at the ground to create a huge screen of dust, taking away the enemy's sight and using a blitzkrieg-style surprise-attack tactic. The faculty had been sprinkling water on the grounds beforehand to prevent sand from being kicked up like this, but they couldn't deal with successive attacks scooping it out entirely. The one who came up with the idea, Seiri Fukiyose, had split the entire class into roles as she held her parka to her chest—one group to shoot the ground and make a dust cloud, one to sneak through the dust cloud and push over their pole, and one for the telepaths who would give the orders to make dust and to get their allies who ran into it out at the proper time. To top it all off, she held command over the entire operation.

As this happened, though, telepathic messages used to convey the order to make dust clouds didn't reach him. Unfortunately, he was at the tip of their spear, so he got blown away by friendly fire and then beaten to a pulp by the enemies. Still, results were results.

The warriors, covered in scrapes and bruises, left the courtyard from the competitors' entrance without thinking at all about either having wrested victory from the arms of defeat or the wounds they sustained doing so. When they did, Miss Komoe, half crying, brought over a first aid kit.

"B-but why? Why did everyone act so recklessly to try and win?! The Daihasei Festival is for everybody to have fun playing in the games! It doesn't matter if we win or lose! You're all so torn up now, and I, well…it doesn't make me the least bit happy…!!"

Despite her complaints, the students began splitting off into twos and threes and leaving, as if to tell her that some things were better left unsaid. Kamijou left the competitor waiting area as well and went over to the cheering section, looking for Index.

She should have been in the student cheering section. Normally it was off-

limits to anyone but students, but he had hesitated to bring her to the regular audience seating. She had 103,000 grimoires packed away in her brain. They were much more valuable outside this city than inside it.

"Indeeex? That's strange. Where did she go?"

Unfortunately, when he went to check the student cheering section, he didn't see her anywhere. They weren't really seats, either—just a blue vinyl sheet lying on the dirt ground of the campus. There was nothing blocking them from the actual event…but anyway, it was really crowded. The students going back and forth were like a wall, and he had difficulty just looking around.

He dove into the crowd and walked from one end of the cheering section to the other, but he didn't find her. He went back the same way. Still, there was no sign of her.

Hmm…That white habit she wears stands out a lot, so I thought I'd see her right away. He reached into his gym shorts pocket and looked over at the school building, which was a bit farther away. *I gave her a zero-yen cell phone, so using that to meet up with her would be fastest…but I seem to have left my cell phone in the classroom.* The fact that he'd never actually *seen* Index using the cell phone gave him cause for a lot of worry, but he decided this would be the best solution.

A lot of schools were cordoned off for the duration of the Daihasei Festival. They contained facilities for ability development curricula, so they couldn't let outsiders see any of it. But it wasn't an issue for the students who belonged to the school like Kamijou. There were doctors and nurses waiting in the nurse's offices in case they had to treat injuries, and the shower rooms and such were open for use as well.

In any event, Kamijou headed for the entrance. There was a pair of black-clad Anti-Skill members in the shoe locker room. It was a little surreal to see teachers, who normally taught history and math at the blackboard, carrying guns.

"Excuse me! I want to find someone who got lost in the crowd, but I left my cell phone in the classroom. Can I go get it?"

"Straight and to the point as usual, Kamijou. If you need to use the school phones because you can't get a signal, give us a call. That is all. Have a nice

festival.”

The math teacher’s reply contained some annoyance. Still, he delivered all the necessary points—obviously the man had training.

Kamijou walked by them and into the school. He traded his shoes for slippers then headed for the stairwell. The empty school was pretty quiet—of course, the announcements being broadcast over the speakers were echoing around because of it, and that was a pain.

He went up the stairs. His classroom was only a few moments’ walk down the hallway. He came to the door and threw it open. *I’m glad Himegami is getting used to everyone in the class. Anyway, let’s get my cell phone and give Index a call. If Himegami’s free, we can bring her along and walk around together—*

A moment later, he fell over.

The administrative committee member, Seiri Fukiyose, was in there, with all her clothes off.

He hadn’t realized that the curtains were all closed until he opened the door. Now, in the darkened classroom, she sat alone on a nearby desk as they faced each other. She was down to one piece of underwear. Really just one—she didn’t even have on her bra. She must have been changing out of her clothes, since they’d gotten soaked with the hose before. The panties she had now seemed to be brand-new, and the wet clothing, including her underwear, had been stuffed into a vinyl bag at her feet. The rest of her clothes must have been in the duffel bag sitting next to that one.

Seiri Fukiyose, without batting an eye, stared at the intruder.

"……"

Eventually, though, her face still impassive, she reached for a nearby chair.

Kamijou's shoulders jerked. "W-wait a minute, Fukiyose! I only came here to get my cell phone so I could find someone who got lost— I didn't have any evil intentions!! And you should really read the manual for the classroom chairs before using them! You'd probably actually kill me if you hit me with that!!"

Wshh!! Kamijou was on the ground groveling within 0.2 seconds. Fukiyose looked at him and sighed, then let go of the chair. She took a new parka out of the duffel bag at her feet and wrapped herself in it for now. "Fine, whatever. Just get out of the classroom for a minute."

"…You're not mad?"

"You're looking for someone who got lost, aren't you? You know, you don't have to keep bowing and groveling like that—but don't look up, Touma Kamijou!"

She had on a parka, but under that the administrative committee member was wearing only panties. And, perhaps due to impatience, she couldn't seem to zip up the parka. Kamijou, as frightened as she was, didn't notice the shakiness in her hands.

Kamijou continued to press his face to the ground like a soldier to a feudal lord, then decided to crawl backward out the door. "…You're seriously not mad?"

"No, so just get out!"

She took a paper box that was on the desk and flung it at his head, and he hastily jumped out of the room. He slid the door shut behind him, sat down in the hallway, and took a deep breath.

Ahh…wow, that scared me…

After shaking his head, he looked down and noticed the paper box in the hallway, about the size of a box of cigarettes. Wondering if it was the one Fukiyose had just thrown at him, he picked it up and looked at it.

Written on it was:

RED-HOT MR. SHEEP—AN EXTREME INFRARED TREATMENT DEVICE YOU CAN USE JUST BY CONNECTING IT TO A CELL PHONE'S BOTTOM PORT. WORKS ON ANYTHING, FROM KNOTS IN YOUR SHOULDERS TO BODILY FATIGUE!!

Upon looking at the box again, the actual device would have been shaped like a cute, deformed sheep. It might have been from the same mascot line as the frog on Mikoto's school bag.

"…You have to plug an accessory into a cell phone? 'Anything from knots in your shoulders to bodily fatigue'? That doesn't seem like a very big range of things. I had no idea people on this planet fell for such clearly suspicious products…Huh? Wait, don't they show this off on TV shopping programs late at night?"

Of course, the television was in the room Index slept in, and by the time late-night shows came on, she was sleeping soundly. He had to watch the programs using the TV on his phone.

Fukiyose, for her part, didn't seem to notice Kamijou's complaining. "Kamijou, is your cell phone in your desk?"

"Oh, there should be a bag on top of the desk. It's in there…"

"After I change, I'll bring it to you, so you wait right there!"

"Thanks, Fukiyose. I'll trade it for this weird as-seen-on-TV product. You know, I didn't think you'd be the sort of person they sold these products to."

He heard a short, startled cry from inside the classroom. She must not have realized what she'd thrown at him. After a few moments, her voice came back from the other side of the door. "Th-that isn't really relevant now, is it? And besides, even *if* I watched shopping programs with a notepad in one hand and lay around on my bed reading shopping magazines, what would be wrong with that?!"

"N-no, I didn't say it was *bad*. I was just a little surprised…"

Fukiyose seemed to have a knack for sassy retorts, but also seemed to have trouble when they were turned on her. Kamijou had thought what he'd said was acceptable, but then words came back from the classroom with even more haste. "What? I can want to fill my room with novelty cookware, which seem convenient when I see them in magazines, but when I get them they're nothing

special, and I only end up using them two or three times before abandoning them, and *it's no business of yours*!"

"It's that bad?! You should calm down and think about it before calling them!"

He meant that as a generous piece of advice for a classmate, but he got some crazy in response. "I mean, doesn't a frying pan with a notched surface just seem so wonderful? They advertised it as catching thirty percent of the grease that comes off meat. But the surface is just dented, and you can't even make eggs sunny-side up with it!"

Kamijou decided to stop trying. He stared at the box again for the infrared sheep device in his hands. "Works on knots in your shoulders, huh…?"

"Why do you sound so dubious? I can have knots in my shoulders at this age and it's perfectly fine!"

"No, not that." He looked up at the ceiling, still sitting in the hallway. "…I was just thinking, maybe you get knots in your shoulders because your breasts are so big…Ack! I mean—"

One moment later…

A duffel bag crashed through the sliding door and into Kamijou. His cell phone was thrown in there as a bonus—Seiri Fukiyose was ever the kind and gracious committee member.

6

"Touma…Huh? You kind of look like you're crying."

"Don't worry about it…"

The girl dressed in a white habit tilted her head cutely to the side, but Kamijou answered in a shaky voice. He also decided not to tell her about the epic adventure that had unfolded before he found her. On top of everything else, the zero-yen cell phone Index had was dead (she didn't understand what the words *charge* or *power supply* meant in this context). He'd ended up relying on her ultra-conspicuous habit to find her.

They had gone back to the student cheering seats. Index had moved through

the crowd to get to Kamijou, and for some reason she cradled an empty plastic bottle in her arms along with the calico. The cat didn't seem to react to it; it yawned lazily as if saying cats being afraid of plastic bottles was only a superstition.

"…A-anyway, my stomach is empty, and I'm in urgent need of something to eat…Touma!"

"What?! What happened to your bento?! Why do you look like an angry ghost starved for energy?!"

"Short Hair was here before, and she gave me a drink and a chocolate cookie… but they didn't help at all…"

"At all?! You were scarfing down extra food and *that's* what you say?! And who's Short Hair?! I don't care, actually, but you made sure to say thank you, right, Index?!"

Index didn't react much to his shouting, though. Girls often had a separate stomach for sweets, but Index's stomach seemed to be constructed to allow her to deal with every single kind of food separately. Kamijou figured that if the bento didn't sate her, then they would need to go to another food stand no matter what. For now, he looked at the thick pamphlet he'd given to Index before. There wasn't much time before his next event, the ball-rolling, but there was a little.

"Whatever. Let's get out of the cheering seats. There are mountains of food by that stall area from before."

When Index heard that, her head whipped around to look at him. "Mountains?!"

"N-no, look, there might be mountains' worth, but Mr. Kamijou didn't say his wallet could cover all of it! Stop it with those sparkling eyes, the guilt, ohhh, the guilt…!!"

After his cry, he took the wallet out of his shorts pocket and checked inside. There was some money in there, but it had to last him the entire seven days of the Daihasei Festival. If he burned through it on the first day, he would undoubtedly meet a tragic end.

Worried about how he'd rein in Index this time, he decided to head over to the stalls for now. Next to him, Index's thoughts turned to this unseen palace of food, causing her eyes, hair, and skin—all of her, basically—to sparkle. He'd heard some theory once about psychology or something that said a person's mental activity could affect them physically. It seemed to be true.

Kamijou and Index approached a large pedestrian crosswalk. They stopped there as the light turned red. There was generally no civilian traffic allowed in Academy City during the Daihasei Festival, but business vehicles like automated buses, taxis, and delivery trucks were still on the roads. That was the reason they couldn't make the place into a so-called "pedestrian paradise" despite the deluge of people around.

The food stalls were just a little bit past the other side of the crosswalk. They could already smell the faint scents of soy sauce and other sauces being cooked from across the street. The light turned green, and Index's sparkle levels were reaching a yearly high…

…when— *Clatter-clatter-clatter*.

One of the Anti-Skill officers, charged with protecting peace in the city, brought a no-crossing sign in front of the road.

"Oh, sorry 'bout this! A big group of wind instrument clubs is starting their parade in a moment. We need to block off the flow of traffic now, or we won't make it, 'kay?"

The officer was apparently the lady who had helped him out during the entrance ceremony about two weeks ago. Though she had her black hair tied in the back, she was a scarily good-looking teacher. She wasn't wearing the green jersey he remembered; instead, she was clad in her official, mostly black gear. She wasn't wearing her helmet—maybe so she wouldn't give the regular people a bad impression? Kamijou didn't know why she didn't just wear more normal clothes instead of jerseys and combat armor.

Their outward image seemed to be the most important thing to Academy City's higher-ups during this public Daihasei Festival. Actually, the strategy going into maintaining appearances was probably half of the whole point here. Academy City was, as has been established, a closed environment, but even that

had its limitations. Outsiders knew, for example, that research on strange, unknown science was proceeding in its completely secret, completely cordoned-off facilities. Naturally, they might feel rather opposed to it. That was the reason the city was opened up like this a few times every year.

Of course, security detail in research areas was much tighter than normal—they didn't want anyone getting to the core secrets of ability development. Making such strict security feel normal to civilians had to be the work of true professionals. The Anti-Skill lady's outfit was probably one piece of the strategy. Her pretty face being visible *did* give her a more favorable impression than having every inch of skin covered in violent gear.

He looked between the no-crossing sign and their destination. "Umm, we want to go over there. Is there a different way around?"

"Ack. The big parade is cutting off a good eight kilometers of this road. I think it was in the pamphlet schedule. Hmm…" The Anti-Skill lady looked it over. "There aren't any pedestrian walkways around here, either…I guess this one here would be the closest? There's an underground mall about three kilometers west of here. If you enter at U04 and leave from V01, you can cross underground…"

Three kilometers…?! Kamijou was dumbfounded. He looked over. Index had a face that implied she couldn't walk that far and was losing the battle with her empty stomach. She slumped to the ground without a word.

7

Mikoto Misaka ran through the streets.

Not inside a closed-off stadium, but through the roads filled with people. There were no restrictions on entering buildings or any road preparations, either.

Despite that, Mikoto was currently competing. She glanced to the side and saw several other runners on the sidewalks opposite the road.

There was no restriction on non-competitors being in the way—in fact, this was the one event in which their presence was a necessity.

It was the scavenger-hunt race.

However, the event took place across three entire academic districts of the

city: Districts 7, 8, and 9. Using modes of transportation such as the self-driving buses and subways were, of course, forbidden. It was almost like a more nuanced, more complicated version of the marathon, where they had to dash out of the stadium, find the designated item, and return. The mental aspect was important; you needed to build the shortest route in your head. And not with your face down on your desk in anxious worry, but in a situation that demanded you deplete your stamina in a long-distance foot race. It was famous for always having very difficult-to-find items given the area of the game.

Argh! This is Kuroko's specialty—she's the one who can teleport! At least make it easier by having this be in a place without the tourists around!

Her ability was immensely powerful, but in areas crowded with bystanders, she had a hard time handling it. In consideration for the civilians, the Academy City General Board had set the maximum level of ability interference to four. However you looked at it, Mikoto's ability was way over the limit.

She was coming to a water supply point, but she ignored the sports drinks set up there and kept going. Too much water in your system would actually slow you down in a long-distance race. She opened up the folded scrap of paper in her hand again and once more checked the name of the indicated item written there. *I drew the short stick again…Whoa!!*

As she ran through the throng, she suddenly spotted her goal "item" right nearby.

This was one of the conditions:

If the indicated item is in the possession of a third party, upon gaining permission from that person, return to the stadium with him or her in tow.

Got it!! Mikoto burst off one of her high-rebound shoe soles and dove into the mountain of people.

Kamijou put a hand on Index's shoulder as she cried and clung to the no-crossing sign. "Come on, Index. If we stay here, the smell is going to tantalize you. The pamphlet has branches of those food stalls on it. Let's go look for something else, all right?"

She sobbed. "It's so close I can almost touch it, but I'll never be able to reach

it!” she shouted, oddly poetically. The Anti-Skill lady who put up the sign looked guilty, but rules were rules. She couldn’t let them past. “T-Touma…Then where is the next closest one of these *stall* thingies?”

“Huh? Hmm…I guess it would be this one,” he said, flipping through the pamphlet at random. “Three kilometers to the west…Wait, that’s exactly where the underground mall entrance is that she told us to use!”

“…Ahhh…”

“Hmm…But if we walk all the way there, I might not make it to my next event. What about the buses…Oh. They’re all detouring around this street during the parade, too. Jeez. Doesn’t look like this is happening, Index. You’ll have to endure it until after the ball-rolling event.”

“(…*snap*)”

“Uh, wait, what?! No! Don’t get mad at me for that! I, Touma Kamijou, profess to have absolutely nothing to do with the location of the stalls or the program of events or the bus routes!!”

Index, who didn’t feel like listening to him, opened her cute mouth like some kind of monster and leaped at him. It was so fast not even the Anti-Skill lady could react. *So now she’s going to eat me!!* He couldn’t help but flinch…

…when he suddenly blurred away at high speed.

Snap!! Index’s teeth dug into empty air.

She looked up, wondering what happened. Her accuracy rate—and kill rate—with her bite attack was 100 percent.

But it was only natural she’d miss—from the right, Mikoto Misaka had come running in swiftly, grabbed Kamijou by the back of his neck, and then quickly disappeared off to the left.

“All right!! I’ve got my ticket to victory! Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

“W-wait…! I can’t breathe! A-at least explain this to me…!!”

The two of them disappeared into the crowd before the dumbstruck Index. She face-planted onto the sidewalk in exhaustion, and the Anti-Skill lady, unable to just leave her be, handed her a ration that looked like a biscuit.

8

Kamijou, now nothing but a messy rag, entered the stadium with Mikoto Misaka, and they cut through the goal tape.

This stadium was in a totally different world than the one his pole-toppling event had been in. It apparently belonged to a sports engineering university. There were white lines on an orange-colored asphalt track like the kind used for official track-and-field events. The seating was set up in tiers like a real stadium as well, and there were far more reporters with cameras and far greater security detail.

An administrative committee high school student was waiting for her at the end, and after Mikoto passed over the goal line, she placed a large sports towel on Mikoto's head. The way she offered a drink and used the small oxygen cylinder was both brisk and businesslike—not only in a practical way, but also in a way with the cameras on them in mind. There would be an awards ceremony and a simple interview after this. She'd basically be waiting in another place for the rest of the competitors to finish.

This is totally different…That committee member moves like an expert personal trainer from some sports engineering place.

Then, the high school committee member, after seeing to Mikoto, gave Kamijou a suspicious look. He braced himself a little, not knowing why, and then she began to whisper.

"(…Touma Kamijou. Yes, this is certainly the item for your scavenger hunt, but you seem to have a lot to do with girls, don't you?!)"

"(…That voice…Wait, Fukiyose?!)"

Kamijou finally looked at her more closely, and it was indeed Seiri Fukiyose. She had on a short-sleeved T-shirt and shorts, with her thin parka over her shoulders. She froze for a second, but she was on the job, so she didn't let herself get any angrier.

"(…I am so, so sorry for earlier, for my lack of caution and attention, and for walking in on you changing!)"

“(…I’m trying my best to forget about it, so just drop it already, Touma Kamijou!)”

“(…Ohhh, I’m really, really sorry. By the way, Fukiyose, does that sheep-shaped infrared TV product actually feel good?)”

“(…——Did you want one?)”

“(…N-no, I was just a little curious! I didn’t say I wanted one!)”

“(…Be quiet. Everyone’s working earnestly, so I would thank you not to get in my way of seeing to the event and the athletes!)”

Without any further desire to listen to Kamijou, Fukiyose picked up a clipboard from the ground lying next to a case of drinks and began writing what were probably race results with a ballpoint pen. Nobody realized Mikoto was right next to him looking a little irritated.

Now that he had figured out Fukiyose was no longer willing to talk to him, he turned back to the one who had dragged him all the way here against his will. “By the way, Misaka. You made me run so far that I’m soaked in sweat, and my calves feel like they’re gonna explode. It would *seem* the rules say you need to get the person’s permission first. Am I just seeing things?”

“Oh, that? Yeah, you’re seeing things. Anyway, it doesn’t say anywhere I can’t leave getting permission until after the fact!”

“…”

“Come on, don’t just sit down like that. You look pathetic. You’re so lazy!” She put the sports towel that was on her on top of Kamijou’s head instead. Then she placed her hands on top of that and started madly wiping off the sweat on his face. It was like she was drying a little kid’s wet hair. Kamijou felt a bit mortified, but she was doing it with such force he couldn’t get her hands away. Flailing his arms was making him look even more like a kid, so he decided to be quiet and let her have her way.

After that, it looked like Mikoto was about to hand him a drink bottle with a straw in it, but suddenly she looked at the straw again and stopped. Her eyes went to Fukiyose and she shook the bottle a little. Fukiyose, writing something on the clipboard, looked up and shook her head. It seemed like the rules said

only one drink per competitor and no more.

"……"

Mikoto stayed still for a few moments, but then at an unfortunate moment some dust must have gotten caught in Kamijou's throat because he started hacking up a lung. She winced, then shook for a few moments before saying, "Argh, you've got no backbone! I can't stand to watch you do that! You can have it! Take it!!"

"Gwahhh!!"

Mikoto pushed the side of the drink bottle against his cheek; he thought he saw some liquid spurt out of it, but she wasn't watching. Her face was bright red as she turned away from him and disappeared over to where the awards ceremony was to be held. They were relatively unelaborate when the games were between classes or academic years because of the number of people, but for individual events they still had the top three properly represented and awarded. Mikoto, having gotten first place, was obviously one of the ones receiving an award.

Next to him, Fukiyose remained silent, clicking her tongue in a clear show of disdain. The event was still going on, though, and she needed to see to the next athlete, so she left to prepare for that. Of course, Mikoto was the *only* one being awarded anything. If this were a bread-eating race, he would have been the bread. There was no point in his continued existence once things were over, so he might as well have just left.

This is just adding insult to injury…This whole event is even more of an inconvenience for the random people involved than for the actual people competing! Wouldn't the whole point be the athletes not being able to go all out, since they have to match the pace of the random people they grab? Kamijou finally came to the end of his doubts, but nobody was around who could answer them. As he slurped up the drink given to him, he wondered if Index was still waiting around by the no-crossing sign.

Suddenly, a scrap of paper blew into him on the wind. It looked like the thing saying what they needed to find for the scavenger-hunt race. There were no other athletes in the stadium yet—Mikoto had clinched first by a landslide—so

this must have been hers. Fukiyose was finished with her busy writing on her clipboard, too, so they didn't need it anymore. The cleaning robots would pick it up even if he left it there, but he decided to pick up the burnable trash and look at it.

What…?

And there it was.

One phrase: "A high school student who has already participated in his or her first event."

What the hell…? I-I mean, sure, I just finished the pole-topple contest. But there's gotta be at least a hundred thousand other kids who fit this condition… Why was…Why was it me…?

He suddenly felt exhausted, like an anvil was pressing down on his back. His shoulders drooped and he trudged to the exit. As he walked, though, he suddenly started to wonder how Misaka even knew he had just done the pole-topple contest at all.

9

It was a long way between the stadium and where he left Index, so he decided to take the bus.

Seventy percent of the currently operating buses were driverless, automatic ones. Kamijou pressed a temporary button attached to the side of the bus stop, and a mainly electric-powered bus glided up without any engine noise.

Driverless technology for passenger planes, trains, and boats was in development, but the car was apparently the most difficult of the bunch. All areas—land, sea, and air—demanded extremely complex control and decision-making. They could be used only during times like the Daihasei Festival, where there were already transportation restrictions in place.

The bus door opened automatically and Kamijou climbed on board. No private cars were allowed in the city, so the bus was packed. There was a driver's seat, but a reinforced glass shield like a telephone booth separated it from passengers. Watching the steering wheel and pedals moving smoothly without

an operator there was pretty fascinating.

The bus didn't use gas and was thus very quiet as it let people off and picked people up a few times before bringing Kamijou to his destination.

He left the vehicle. This still wasn't where he'd left Index—that was a little ways away. The road was blocked off by the wind ensemble parade, so the bus routes had been changed temporarily.

He trotted along until he began to hear a competition broadcast mixed in with the hustle and bustle of the crowd. Everything coming over the stadiums' speakers was being broadcast via various big-screen TVs on department store walls, the sides of blimps, and to temporarily constructed outdoor theaters.

"Regarding the results of the previous men's obstacle course, the decision has been made that—"

"These are the events that will be beginning within the next hour. Once an event begins, no further spectators will be allowed entry, so please be—"

"The Fourth Combined School scavenger hunt certainly didn't betray anyone's expectations as Mikoto Misaka from Tokiwadai Middle School won in a landslide. She crossed the finish line a full seven minutes ahead of the next closest competitor—"

"Attention, we have a lost child. If there is a Mr. Charles Goncourt visiting from Saint-Tropez, please find the nearest security robot and have it verify your face and Academy City–issued Daihasei Festival entrance pass. When your position has been confirmed, we will immediately bring your child to you. Veuillez l'entendre. Nous vous annonçons un enfant manquant "

As he listened to the broadcasts, their volumes quickly increasing then passing him by, he looked around him. All right. She wouldn't just go off somewhere and get lost, would she?

It would be great if he could call her cell phone, but unfortunately, her zero-yen phone's battery was dead. She apparently had perfect recall and seemed to memorize every road they walked down, but he was still worried. As he trudged on in the blazing sun, he thought, Well, maybe I should have stopped by the food stalls and bought her a thing or two. He couldn't go back now, though. His

next event was quickly approaching. For now he'd just find Index and hurry to the stadium where his class was waiting. He sped up…

…and then stopped abruptly.

There was someone he knew in the crowd of people.

Long hair dyed red. Earrings. Silver rings, one on all ten fingers. A cigarette in the corner of his mouth and a bar-code tattoo under his right eye. It was a very un-priest-like priest.

Stiyl Magnus.

A true sorcerer belonging to a post in the English Puritan Church called Necessarius, the Church of Necessary Evils.

??? What? Did he come to see Index?

Stiyl was a member of the magic side—Kamijou couldn't imagine him having any interest in the festivities. It might be logical to think he came to see Index, his former colleague, whose face he barely saw anymore. Kamijou didn't have any particular reason to refuse him that, and having someone he knew stay with Index would put his own mind at ease. He decided to let him take care of her during the events as he casually approached…

…but Stiyl seemed to be talking to someone. "…so…that's what it looks like…I think it's possible, don't you?"

He heard a voice. Who was he talking to? Kamijou got closer to check—and saw his classmate Motoharu Tsuchimikado standing there.

A multi-spy—a mole buried in both Academy City and the English Puritan Church. From afar, he gave off a very amicable air, but he was speaking low so others couldn't overhear.

"Right. You…a point…For them…this…only chance."

Kamijou got a bad feeling about this. They were smiling, and that by itself made them seem to blend in to the Daihasei crowds…but something important was missing. They didn't look amused in the slightest. Those smiles were forced—not born of positive emotions but negative ones. And that clearly set their countenances apart from the rest of the massive festivities.

He walked closer and closer, hoping to get rid of such ideas…

…and then Stiyl Magnus said something quietly.

“That’s why we need to do something about the sorcerer who has wormed their way into the city. By ourselves.”

And just like that, Kamijou’s world, based completely in science…

…transformed into another, colored by sorcery.

INTERLUDE ONE

There was a student named Kuroko Shirai.

The petite girl went to an elite girls' school for ability development called Tokiwadai Middle School, and she liked to wear her brown hair in twin tails. She was a user of teleportation and acknowledged as a Level Four, placing her relatively high up even within Tokiwadai, but despite that, she wouldn't be participating in the Daihasei Festival. Several days ago, a certain incident had left her with wounds that had yet to heal, and she was still half-covered in bandages.

However.

In spite of the doctor's orders to stay in bed, she had slipped out of the hospital onto a large Academy City road. She wore her usual Tokiwadai uniform, but she was sitting in a wheelchair. It was a sports model rather than the usual kind, featuring wheels that came inward at the top like the body of a formula-one car.

Kuroko Shirai wasn't the one wheeling it along. Behind her was Kazari Uiharu holding its handles. They were colleagues in Judgment, an Academy City peacekeeping organization, among other things.

Uiharu was wearing the white short-sleeved T-shirt and black leggings of a regular athletic girl, but the decoration on her head made of roses and hibiscus flowers was clearly unsuited for the look. So many artificial flowers were on it that you could spot the flower crown even from afar.

She pushed the sports wheelchair along, smiling brightly. "Well, we were all toiling away under the hot sun, so when I thought of you sitting all alone in an air-conditioned room taking a rest, I just wanted you to help us out, too. Tee-

hee-hee.”

“…Your wonderful show of friendship is appreciated. The moment I’m better, I’m teleporting your clothes away and leaving you completely naked. I do hope you look forward to it.”

Shirai’s reply sounded exhausted, but she had been bored from lying around alone during a big event like the Daihasei Festival, so she was kind of happy that Uiharu forced her to come out here. She would die before telling anyone *that*, though.

This wasn’t her first Daihasei Festival, of course, but it happened only once a year, so it was still something special. The roads were the same as always, but just hearing the competition commentary and fireworks seemed to give everything a new color. Some of the people walking around—not Academy City residents, but outsiders—looked at her with curiosity, which was somewhat annoying. Shirai knew she had powers, though, so she rationally saw their behavior as only natural.

She looked around a little from her sports wheelchair. “So is there a problem happening at the festival this year?”

“For now, nothing major. We did have a corporate spy posing at a fried calamari stall trying to steal DNA mappings from student saliva, but that was about it. This is the first festival I’m working for Judgment, though. The others tell me it’s been relatively easy this year.”

“Yes, this is certainly on the tame side compared to the attempted destruction of an unmanned helicopter by anti-AI radicals, or the attempted stadium bombing by spiritual culture advocates.”

Her response was so smooth that Uiharu unwittingly grimaced. Those incidents hadn’t ever gone public, so she was in a state of surprise (*Things like that actually happened last year?!*). Shirai, though, would have been prepared to get involved in trouble like that if she’d been acting as a Judgment member during this festival.

Then her ears picked up on stadium commentary, which she realized was coming from a big screen on the wall of a department store. The footage wasn’t live, it seemed, but rather the highlights of previous events. A clear male voice

continued the explanation.

"The Fourth Combined School scavenger hunt certainly didn't betray anyone's expectations as Mikoto Misaka from Tokiwadai Middle School won in a landslide. She crossed the finish line a full seven minutes ahead of the next closest competitor—"

A track-and-field stadium blinked onto the screen.

A camera had caught the competitor's face, and her name was on the screen as well. Whoever it was, she would be practically world famous, since the broadcast was going all over the planet…or so one would think, but that wasn't actually the case. There were more than 1.8 million people competing, and even though she won first place, the events weren't nearly Olympic level where the winners would leave their names in history. It might be easier to consider it like a little league whose athletes hadn't been scouted for the big leagues yet. In such a situation, it was impossible to remember every one of the athletes' names and faces, so people would celebrate and then forget about it—that was the audience's standard operating procedure.

Because of that, Kuroko Shirai didn't have much interest in what was on the big screen, but then…

"—Mikoto Misaka, who took first place, stayed on her feet even after finishing, and she seemed to have even more energy to spare."

Shirai whipped around to face the big screen so fast that Uiharu, who had been pushing her wheelchair, froze in panic.

"Oh, my Big Sister…My wonderful Big Sister…Ah, my Big Sister (haiku)! You've done it again! A flawless victory, your youthful, vigorous limbs on display for everyone to see! Please, I beg your forgiveness for not seeing you live or even being able to record it! I am a failure!!"

Sparkle sparkle sparkle sparkle sparkle sparkle sparkle!! Shirai's eyes glittered, but…

"Her consideration for the one who cooperated and ran with her was impressive as well. I suppose it is the very decency one would expect from the elite Tokiwadai Middle School."

What? thought Shirai, a question mark appearing over her head. *Wha—No…?!*

A moment later, she saw—

Saw the male student Mikoto Misaka was holding the hand of as she ran to the stadium.

Saw how she wiped the male student's body clean with her own sports towel.

Saw how she handed the sports drink she'd already had some of to the male student.

That little upstart…!! T-t-taking Big Sister's hand and being her escort, taking a-ad-advantage of her human decency to have her wipe his sweat all over, a-and even laying a hand on the beautiful drink she had just been drinking!!

Kuroko's entire body broke out into a tremble as she looked at the far-too-lucky male student.

Wait. She totally remembered this kid. Actually, she'd just run into him a few days ago. She leaped up full force out of her wheelchair with a loud clatter. "Y-you're dead! Don't think you'll come out of this alive!! And you made Big Sister blush so hard in front of everyone! Frustrated doesn't even *begin to describe me right now*!!"

"W-wait, Shirai!! Please calm down! Wait, how did you even stand up with those serious wounds?! This isn't the time to show your fighting spirit like in a *shounen* manga!!"

As Kuroko Shirai half cried, her very soul enraged, and Kazari Uiharu yelled at her from a few inches away, they only made the Daihasei Festival even livelier.

CHAPTER 2

Stadium of Sorcerer and Esper
"Stab_Sword."

1

Next up was the ball-rolling event.

Touma Kamijou and the other students in his grade had already entered the field. In the relatively small asphalt schoolyard, each opposing team had lined up with their classmates on either side.

The rules were irregular. Upon the firing of a signal gun, each team would need to push its twenty-five giant balls across the goal line behind the opposing team. Whichever team was first to get at least half its balls over the goal line would be the winner.

The biggest difference between this and normal ball-rolling games was that the balls were large enough that opposing teams' balls would run into each other at least once. The very moment that happened it would be possible to obstruct the other balls by using your own or firing abilities at them.

Kamijou and a few other classmates all had their hands on one of their white team's balls, which was almost two meters high. They smelled sweat, and they smelled dust. The tingling air right before the signal gun went off was stinging their skin, and though this was all just fun and games, the current atmosphere somehow seemed to say that wouldn't cut it.

But even in this situation, Kamijou was preoccupied with something else: what Tsuchimikado and Stiyl had just talked to him about not twenty minutes ago.

"Security is lower in Academy City right now so they can let in all these people, right?"

"It means sorcerers are slipping right through the holes."

Kamijou's class had a total of three balls assigned to them. One for the boys, one for the girls, and one for both. Kamijou was in charge of the boys' one. Aisa Himegami, at the ball next to them, kept looking over silently like she had something to say, but he was too absorbed in his own thoughts to notice.

"But why? Did they come to kidnap Index again?! Then I'll—"

"Relax, Touma Kamijou. They're most likely not after her this time. It would end in only more trouble and hardship for them if they were to lay hands on her."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"We'll answer ya later, Kammy. Let's get down to business right away. About why the sorcerers made their way into the city in the first place."

He heard the words *on your marks* come over the school loudspeaker.

Everyone held their breath. They lowered themselves just slightly. Kamijou glanced over to the side. Motoharu Tsuchimikado, in his signature sunglasses, had his hands on the ball with their other classmates.

"Wait…sorcerers? More than one?"

"We've even got confirmation on two already. Lidvia Lorenzetti, from the Roman Orthodox Church—and Oriana Thomson, a smuggler born in England in her employ. Both female. There should also be at least one other person they're looking to make a deal with, but we haven't figured that out yet. They're saying Nikolai Tolstoj from the Russian Catholic Church is suspicious, but we don't have confirmation on that."

"A smuggler? And a deal? What are they trying to do?"

"Just what it sounds like, Kammy! They're tryin' to make a trade for a Soul Arm belonging to the Church, right here in this city."

Bang!! The signal gun went off. Kamijou, his thoughts elsewhere, reacted a moment late.

"But why here…? Academy City has the least connection to occult stuff in, like, the world, doesn't it?"

"Well, yeah, nya! I should say that's exactly why*. Anti-Skill and Judgment can't*

go intercepting and arresting sorcerers from occult factions willy-nilly. But the Crusaders and Necessarius from the occult side can't easily set foot in Academy City, either. This place is hard for either side to take action in, basically.

"Their movements would be very restricted were it not for the security being lax during the Daihasei Festival. But right now, they have to loosen the security so they can be bold and take advantage of it."

Kamijou hastily began to run so that the ball wouldn't leave him behind. Countless footfalls and the sounds of the giant balls rolling reverberated through the ground and up through his feet. The balls were empty inside, so they didn't feel very heavy. Because of that, though, they were easily affected by wind, and any slipup could cause them to roll sideways.

"But Stiyl is here. Couldn't you just get a bunch of your Necessarius friends here in secret and capture them?"

"I'm operating under the pretext that I'm acquainted with you and came for leisure. We can't call up other sorcerers. If the English Puritan Church ended up taking credit for this as an organization, then all the other sorcery-related factions sitting back and watching this would want in on it as well. You think all of them are friendly toward Academy City? There would be people trying to sabotage it without a doubt. You think you can rely on any of them to even try to protect this place that is directly opposed to all things occult?"

"Academy City is the head of the science faction. It has way more say in matters than a single organization on the sorcery side nobody's heard of, nya. But if Academy City were to ignore the opinions of the smaller groups, then bigger sorcerer's societies will start quibbling and arguing, too. This problem with Lidvia and Oriana is real delicate, Kammy. The situation's already a pain to deal with. If we call in more than we need, Academy City's gonna fall into total chaos. Think of it like this: The only ones who can move right now and put a stop to this are the friendly sorcerers who came here on vacation. There's really only a few sorcerers with contacts in Academy City anyway; obviously they were going to have to stick with an elite corps."

The balls tumbled and rolled along, slowly but surely picking up speed. The ball belonging to Kamijou's group was ahead of the rest of their team's. That meant

they were in serious danger of being the first to clash with the enemy's balls.

"??? But wouldn't Kaori Kanzaki fit into that group? Wasn't she, like, some crazy-strong person? A saint, or something like that. Wouldn't we want more help?"

"They can't use Kanzaki. Especially not this time—given the Soul Arm being traded."

"Huh? What's that mean?"

"Kammy, the Soul Arm is apparently called the Stab Sword. And it can…"

The ball was too big for Kamijou to see in front of him very well. Blue Hair shouted that they were getting close, and Kamijou focused his mind.

"…instantly kill any saint in existence."

He heard a voice behind him shout, "Look out!"

His other classmates all flew away from the big ball at once.

Huh? I thought we still had a bit before getting to their guys…

But right as Kamijou wondered that…

…something slammed into him from behind.

"Gwaahh!!"

Their female classmates' ball had overtaken them at a blistering pace, and it swallowed up Kamijou as it rolled. Next to that one, the co-ed ball ran by.

Seiri Fukiyose shouted coldly, "What are you doing, Touma Kamijou?!"

Aisa Himegami gave him this look, like she wanted to say, *Once again—your fake bad luck with women. It's showing.*

2

A saint.

"You know the word. It means someone with qualities similar to the Son of God in Crossism. If you look at Idol Theory, you see that replicas of the cross used to crucify the Son of God hold a degree of the original's power, right? If you

apply that to the Son of God and people, then they have a degree of the Son of God's power. Those chosen few are called saints. They have an unimaginable amount of power. **Except…**"

It was after the ball-rolling had ended (again in victory for Kamijou's school, fortunately) and they'd left the field. As they sipped their sports drinks—recommended to them by the administrative committee member Seiri Fukiyose ("Here, it has amino acids, drink up! And this one's got black vinegar and isoflavones!")—they continued their conversation on the road.

"Saints have one weakness."

"They do? I mean, Kanzaki was so strong she could fight on even terms with an actual angel."

Saying the word *angel* didn't quite feel real to him, but he'd actually seen one in real life. Even the fact that he really saw one seemed unreal, though. The angel called itself Misha Kreutzev, and it was so powerful it could destroy the world with a fingertip. Kanzaki had fought through it with a level of skill that Kamijou could never even hope to get anywhere near.

However, Tsuchimikado continued, slurping up his drink. "There's a downside to their strength. Listen—saints are people with traits similar to the Son of God. The power they're granted is also added onto by the special traits and attributes of the Son of God. Which means…" He paused. "Putting it simply, *saints inherit the same weaknesses as the Son of God, too*."

"Oh," mumbled Kamijou.

"The Son of God died once. He may have been resurrected and ascended to heaven, but that one fact remains the same. And do you know how exactly the Son of God died, Kammy?" Tsuchimikado looked at him and grinned. "He was stabbed to death. His hands and feet were affixed to the cross with iron nails, and at the end they shoved a lance into his side. Opinions are split among theologians over whether the lance was to finish him off or to check to make sure he was dead, but it doesn't change the fact that all these 'attacks' were ones to stab him to death, nya." He gulped down some more of his drink. "The Stab Sword extracts the religious significance that Christianity places on the execution of martyrs and the stabbing of Jesus on the cross—then amplifies,

compresses, and focuses it into a weapon said to be able to pierce the skin of dragons and pin them to the earth. It doesn't do anything to regular people, but it's so strong, it can send a saint to their grave in one strike. *And at any distance, just by pointing the tip at them.*"

Kamijou shuddered.

"Scary, right?" Tsuchimikado continued, agreeing. "Once the Stab Sword is activated, you can be in a nuclear bunker, on the other side of the world, or all the way on Pluto, but just having the tip aimed at you will kill you. Laser weapons aren't even on the same level of brutal convenience. It was apparently originally made to kill saints with greed and ambition, though, nya."

"And they're trading it for something? What the heck are the sorcerers planning to do?"

"War, of course. Saints are basically the sorcery world's version of nuclear weapons. If you could surgically kill enemy saints and preserve your own, everything in the war would change."

A war.

For an ordinary high school student living in modern Japan, the term didn't hold much weight. But Kamijou had once witnessed a fraction of what it might look like. A three-sided battle among the English Puritan Church, the Roman Orthodox Church, and Amakusa over the *Book of the Law* and the sister said to hold the key to deciphering it, Orsola Aquinas. When Tsuchimikado said "war," though, did he mean something on an even bigger scale? Like the kind that can entangle unrelated people from all over the world and redraw political borders?

"But there's plenty of sorcerers who *aren't* saints, right? I feel like Necessarius could fight even without Kanzaki."

"Kammy, Kammy. That's not the problem. It doesn't matter if other factions are able to win or not. All they need is the *illusion that they can win* to start a war. Saints are symbols of power, and if they die, it's not hard to start imagining the total collapse of the system of sorcerer's societies. Like when despair spreads through a nation after the royal family is killed off, nya. As soon as someone sees a chance, it's over. Whoever thinks they can win is gonna plunge right into battle —*without seeing the miserable results waiting for them*."

Tsuchimikado spoke his words with such intimidation that they sent a chill down Kamijou's spine. Perhaps it was because he worked as a spy and knew firsthand just how fragile the world was.

"The countries and groups whose religious power balance is thrown into disarray by the arbitrary killing of their saints would come under all sorts of attacks from magic factions both inside and out and eventually collapse. It might not be visible, but those nations and the world would definitely be devastated. And if the unbalancing in one spot lights a fire, others might start plotting to alter their own power balances, and that could lead to war. That's why the English Puritan Church's 0th parish, Necessarius, a national peacekeeping agency that fights sorcerers, can't let this little incident go, nya."

Despite Tsuchimikado's actual words being an assertion of his own determination, he ended his sentence with a lot of levity. Kamijou was too much of an amateur to determine whether that made his position as a spy nice and easy, or if he just had all his emotions under control like a professional.

He kept at his drink, which was now lukewarm. "But if it's really that serious, shouldn't you ask for Index's help?" Yes—Index wasn't here. After Stiyl and Tsuchimikado had explained things to him, he'd been dragged along to the school field for the ball-rolling competition without getting to meet up with her again. She was extremely reliable in matters concerning sorcery. In fact, as far as Kamijou knew, there was nobody more knowledgeable about it than her.

Tsuchimikado rejected that outright, though. "Nope. We can't use the Index of Prohibited Books this time. We can't let her anywhere near this incident, and we can't tell her anything about it, either."

"…Why not?"

"Hmm. It's a pretty complicated situation, nya. I guess I'll start from the beginning, so listen up." He scratched his head like this was all a big bother. "Like I said before, the science faction can't interfere with the sorcery faction very much. Right now, Academy City's got its hands full with problems both inside and out…Do you understand that?"

"Huh? Right, because Anti-Skill and Judgment can't do anything to sorcerers directly." Kamijou felt like Stiyl had explained similar circumstances when an

alchemist hijacked Misawa Cram School in secret. The science faction and sorcery faction both had a monopoly on their own technology, and that's how the two worlds stayed at peace. If an Academy City peacekeeping organization were to try and arrest a sorcerer under these circumstances, it could mean a leak of the sorcery faction's intel and tech to the science faction. "As an analogy, it would be like a state-of-the-art jet fighter crashing in enemy territory and them grabbing it, right?"

"You got it. In addition, a bunch of sorcerers coming into Academy City as an organization would be bad. Which means the sorcerers here now trying to complete their deal pretty much have free roam at the moment, nya. Seriously, they could probably even start killing people."

Now that he thought about it, this whole setup seemed absurd to Kamijou. Everyone was after the same thing, but because of all this, nobody could actually do anything about it.

"So that's why we special exceptions—you, me, and Stiyl—are doing stuff…" Tsuchimikado grinned. "But *there are groups that aren't taking that too well, either*. They're all casting their nets, trying to find out if there's a way to sneak into Academy City for one reason or another. Some of them want to resolve the situation, and some of them don't. They're using radar-like spells outside the city to detect the flow of mana. So that as soon as something happens, they can storm in, nya~."

"Huh…Is that how it works?" That was all Kamijou could think to say. He didn't honestly have an idea of what "mana flows" were. "But what does that mana detection have to do with Index? She can't use mana, can she? Even if they used a radar spell, that wouldn't mean we had to keep her away from all this."

Kamijou had amnesia, so this was recorded in his brain only as knowledge, but Index couldn't use any magic whatsoever in exchange for having access to the 103,000 grimoires. Supposedly it was just a countermeasure to guard against her using the grimoires for her own ends or just going crazy, but…

"That is what we call a difference of opinion. Listen, Kammy. A whole lot of sorcery-related incidents have been going on around you for the past few months. And you've settled them all brilliantly. But in the world of sorcery, your

name hasn't really gotten around, nya~."

"W-well, it would be weird for me if it had. Why's that important?"

"I'm saying that compared to you, *Index's name is far more important*. Most people in the sorcery world don't think, 'A lot of incidents are happening around Touma Kamijou.' They're thinking, 'A lot of incidents are happening around the one managing the 103,000 grimoires: the Index of Prohibited Books.'"

Oh, I get it, thought Kamijou.

"So most of them are working under the assumption that if something happens, she'll be at the center of it. It would be only natural for them to search the areas around Index, right? Unfortunately for them, there's no spell that would allow them to monitor all of Academy City at all times. Even if they were to use a group spell, like the Gregorian Choir, it would still be down to a circle about two kilometers across, nya. So if we put Index far away from the stuff going on, we'll be able to draw their attention elsewhere. That also means they would probably overlook a sorcery battle or two happening somewhere else, nya~. But if we called her to the middle of everything, that wouldn't happen."

"Are you telling me we're supposed to do something about this without *Index* noticing any of the sorcery or whatever?" It might seem simple, but it was actually a pretty difficult problem. In the first place, Index could perfectly remember those 103,000 grimoires for the purpose of countering any sorcerer in existence. She would never miss even a tiny hint, and once she got that, she'd naturally act. But if they explained the situation to her in advance and told her to stay put, she probably wouldn't accept it. The one thing she hated most was other people getting mixed up in sorcery-related incidents, so she wouldn't be okay with someone being a substitute for her.

As Kamijou mulled it over, Tsuchimikado shook his now-empty drink container. "Still, Kammy, I guess this is just another instance of your *rotten luck*, nya~. Everything you did, and they still give all the credit to Index, huh? Must be tough."

"You're dumb. I'm worried about her. I can't believe her. She's already got plenty of reasons for other people to go after her, and now this…" He clicked his tongue and turned his thoughts even more inward. Tsuchimikado smiled a little

as he watched. Just a small smile, with no sarcasm or scorn in it.

“Well, whatever the case, nya~. We’re just gonna leave the problem of Index to you, Kammy! I mean, just promise to show her around some place or other, and get her as far away as you can from anywhere you think sorcery might start flying back and forth.”

“Huh? What?! You make it sound so easy…”

“You’ll be fine! You’ve raised so many flags already. It’ll be a cinch!”

“That is one big, unfounded clump of confidence! I mean, what are we supposed to do for our events? Fukiyose’s gonna go crazy on us if we skip out on them without telling her anything! No one will even want to look at us when she’s through with us!!”

“You’ve got a ton of flags raised—use them for something! Index is more important right now. Some ‘index of prohibited books’ she is. I bet you could just give her some food and she’d do whatever you wanted, nya~. If worse comes to worst, just throw some candy in the direction that’s not where the incident’s happening, nyaaa!”

“If Index heard you say that, she might bite off your whole skull. Actually, I guess I’ve never seen her bite anyone except me…,” concluded Kamijou tiredly as Tsuchimikado patted him on the shoulder a few times.

3

The asphalt under the hot sun was really hot.

That was the thought the starving Index had as she lay flat on the sidewalk.

After the parade ended and the female Anti-Skill officer Aiho Yomikawa took away the no-crossing sign, she couldn’t look at the girl anymore. She stopped her work and swept Index up into her arms like a princess. There probably weren’t any scientific cooling effects applied to the bench, but she laid her on one anyway, under one of the trees lining the road. The calico that was with Index followed right on Yomikawa’s heels and jumped up onto the bench.

Then, her female teaching colleague, Komoe Tsukuyomi, whom she had notified in advance, finally arrived. Supposedly she was older than Yomikawa,

but she was wearing a cheerleading outfit: a light green tank top and a short, pleated white skirt. She probably had it on so she could root for her class along with the other students, but Yomikawa sighed; the fact that the outfit looked good on her at her age was nothing short of terrifying.

“M-Miss Yomikawa! You said you found one of my acquaintances, and— Ack!” Miss Komoe looked at Index and yelped. “Th-the sister?! Wh-why does she look like a wilted vegetable left over at the supermarket?! O-oh, don’t tell me she’s been suffering from heat stroke since before I got here!!”

Her shouting made the calico meow disagreeably and its fur stand up a little.

*My…*As Yomikawa stared at Index on the bench, she thought. A cursory glance might tell a person she had heat stroke. After all, she was collapsed in a habit of pretty thick fabric under the hot sun. Thinking that the heat had gotten to her was probably the correct judgment.

“Miss Tsukuyomi, earth to Tsukuyomi! Come on, calm down a little, ’kay?”

“H-how am I supposed to stay calm?! This sister may not be one of my students, but she’s still a child I need to protect!!”

“Yes, I get it, enough of the ideal teacher spiel. It’s not heat stroke, ’kay? She’s just hungry.”

“What?” Miss Komoe looked at her, confused. And then: “A-again, how am I supposed to stay calm?! Malnutrition is a dangerous thing in and of itself!!”

“Jeez. I suppose I should respect my senior teacher for not deflating even a bit here. But you know, I already gave her three servings of my portable rations and she scarfed them down.”

At Yomikawa’s appalled voice, the calico meowed comfortably as if to say, *Yeah, and she gave some to me, too*. There were crumbs left over around his mouth.

“…Then it’s not that she’s hungry, it’s that she’s so full it hurts?! But you’re a teacher, too, so you should know how to properly maintain nutrition…!”

“You know what? Why don’t you just hear it from her?”

Yomikawa pointed her finger at the bench. As Miss Komoe pushed down her

finger, saying it wasn't polite to point at people, she looked at Index again.

In a very weak voice, the exhausted girl in white said, "I-I'm hungry…I-is Touma here yet…?"

"You're really just hungry?!"

"That's what I said! Right, so can I leave her to you?"

Miss Komoe assented with a bow and a word of thanks, and Yomikawa turned and trotted away, waving one hand back at her. It was a carefree response, but it was because Yomikawa knew she didn't need to hesitate with her.

Miss Komoe looked back at Index. She was lying there exhausted on the bench, trembling slightly. "I-I smell sauce…If I smell any more, I'll be done for…"

The teacher's shoulders finally loosened (not from exhaustion but relief—which was very like her), and then she reacted to the word *sauce* Index had suddenly said. She sniffed around. "Hmm? You mean the food stalls?"

She looked around them. Across the road where Aiho Yomikawa had put up the no-crossing sign was a corner with homemade-food stalls lined up like a student-run culture festival.

"Little Sister, I bought you some food!"

Index looked at the products from the stalls Miss Komoe had chosen randomly and bounded upright on the bench. "W-w-wooooooooow…"

She sounded like an archaeologist who had just discovered new ruins. The calico in her arms made the same sort of sound.

"I didn't know which you wanted, so I brought some *yakisoba*, *okonomiyaki*, a hot dog, and some *takoyaki*…Oh, you're from the West. Are you okay with eating octopus? How about Japanese pancake?"

"I'll eat it! I'm so hungry I'd even eat fermented beans like *natto* or dried horse mackerel!"

She looked at the food wrapped in clear plastic, which was made by students and not very high quality, but Index's eyes were sparkling with a lust for food. The calico began to shake a little in her arms, too, as though her attachment to food had awakened its animal instincts.

Miss Komoe gave a pained grin and said, “Ah, ah-ha-ha. Well then, this is a good opportunity. Let’s use it to learn how to hold our chopsticks properly instead of in your fist and— Aaah!”

Index had started devouring her targets before she could begin an explanation. *Chomp chomp chew chew munch munch!!* The pile of food was disappearing fast. The calico, undaunted, went for the *yakisoba* noodles, but having a cat’s tongue was a fatal handicap when faced with hot food.

Miss Komoe’s shoulders drooped in disappointment. “No…I thought we finally…finally had a chance for me to teach you about Japanese culture…”

“*Chomp chomp*…Huh? Did you say something, Komoe?”

As she gulped down the final piece of *okonomiyaki*, she blinked a few times blankly. The huge pile of food had been completely leveled.

Passionate teacher that she was, Miss Komoe had a weakness: She’d get depressed if someone took away an opportunity for her to teach something. Still, the full and completely satisfied Index didn’t notice.

As her tiny shoulders shook, she said, “I-I didn’t say anything important anyway! I’m not frustrated at all! I would never cry over something as silly as this!”

“??? Oh, I didn’t thank you. Thanks a lot for the food! Wait, was that wrong? Why do you look like you’re going to cry, Komoe?” Index tilted her head to the side. “…Anyway, I wonder where Touma went. It’s almost lunchtime!”

“…Um, lunchtime…after th-that…?” stammered Miss Komoe, but Index wasn’t listening.

“I really wonder where Touma went…I’ve been like this all day…I wonder if we’ll be away from each other for the whole day…”

That relit the flame of her teacher’s soul. This sister didn’t seem to be affiliated with any school. That meant it would be hard for her to stay with Touma Kamijou during the Daihasei Festival. There were a few events where non-student residents would compete, but they were all them versus the students anyway. She’d never actually compete alongside him.

Miss Komoe could sort of understand how she felt. Being left alone at an event of this size could seem like no big deal, but it could also be devastating. But on the other hand, if she could be involved somehow, no matter what it was, she would be able to gain a sense of closeness and satisfaction. *Kami just doesn't get it, does he? Leaving a poor child like this by herself*, she thought as she shook her head at her terrible student, considering her options.

Not a compromise but a solution. "It's okay! There's a way you can take part in this, too!" She found an answer. *I'd be a failure as a teacher if I can't help a child who looks so sad and lonely*, she thought, giggling a little.

"Eh? Wh-what?"

"I said, there's a way for you to enjoy the Daihasei Festival with Kami! You don't have to be by yourself anymore!"

At first, Index was taken aback by her overly cheerful voice, but then she forgot about her appetite and her expression softened. The calico didn't seem to care; it stretched and yawned.

"Wh-what is it? What should I do?"

"This, right here!" Smiling, Miss Komoe pulled on the chest of her tank top a little. She was wearing a cheerleading uniform. "Eh-heh-heh. You can't actually play in the games, but you can cheer him on from the sidelines. And cheerleading is the perfect way to do that, right? If you think it's too embarrassing alone, then don't worry! Miss Komoe will be right there with you!"

Miss Komoe smiled, and she kept on smiling. Energy from actively teaching bubbled to the surface, causing her face to shine. Index started to feel a little cautious about this. "Wh-why do you look so happy about this, Komoe?"

"You don't need to act like Little Red Riding Hood with these questions. Eh-heh, being happy about getting an impromptu chance to teach you cheerleading? Eh-heh-heh, being able to get you to pay me back for missing that opportunity to teach you how to use chopsticks? Eh-heh, eh-heh-heh, I'm not thinking of any of that!"

Index was frozen in place after seeing this new side of a person she thought she knew; Miss Komoe took that as a good thing, grabbed her hand, and led her

off somewhere.

4

Touma Kamijou went back to the point where they'd been blocked from crossing the road earlier, but Index wasn't around anymore. The no-crossing sign was gone entirely, and the Anti-Skill lady was nowhere in sight.

According to Tsuchimikado:

"Searching for Lidvia and Oriana is important, but making sure Index doesn't find out what's happening in Academy City right now is just as vital. Kammy, I'll check with city security on my end and look for any traces of sorcery, so you meet with Index at regular intervals and don't let her catch on. If there's any suspicion about what we're doing, Index will probably ruin our plans and plant herself right at the center of the incident."

So he said, but Kamijou couldn't do anything like this. *Nobody around to ask where Index is, and no clues. I can't call her, because her cell phone's battery is dead…Did she actually get lost somewhere for real?* Kamijou didn't think it was a big deal, since he was used to the streets of Academy City, but if someone, for example Stiyl, were to find out she'd gotten lost, he'd say, "I understand the situation. For now, if you could just die, please?" and attack him without further ado.

Hmm. Where would Index go…? He glanced around, then his eyes locked on to something in front of him. On the other side of the main street, there was an area with student-made food stalls like a culture festival. "N-no. Did her hungriness get to her and make her go floating in there without any money? Then that means the entire street corner could've already been devastated by the Starving Girl Disturbance…!!"

Kamijou blanched. Imagine Breaker, the power in his right hand, could wipe out any supernatural ability, magic, or even divine miracle with just a touch, but up against that chomping girl he was an ineffective Level Zero. Nevertheless, he needed to stop her with his own hands. He strengthened his resolve and headed toward the stall area.

But then, something bounced into him from the side. He turned and saw Aisa

Himegami in her short sleeves and shorts and Maika Tsuchimikado peddling her bento from atop a cleaning robot, staring at him. Apparently Himegami had been basically following her around as she sold her wares, making conversation as they walked the streets.

“Your face. You look like a hero of justice. About to face the final boss. Why do you look like that?”

“You look like you’re gonna fall over and die right here! If you’re hungry, do you want a bento?”

Just as he was about to charge into the battlefield, their calm voices ruined all his determination. “Hey! You know! I left Index hungry and alone when I went to the last event. And now that I’m back, she’s nowhere in sight. And the closest place with food is that food-stall area, and she could have already rampaged through there, and I…!!”

His basically crying declaration took the two girls off guard. “You mean that sister? She walked over there.” Himegami pointed in the complete opposite direction of the food stalls.

“I think she got kidnapped by that famous miniteacher from your school,” answered Maika from her perch on the cleaning robot, looking up and away in recollection.

“??? She got kidnapped…No, that can’t be. Miss Komoe knows who she is. So then, what? Is she going to show her around the city? Well, whatever. Thanks for the tip. I’ll go find her now.”

With just that, Kamijou walked off in the direction Himegami had pointed. From behind him, Maika loudly wished him luck, and Himegami remained silent. *Hmm…Since when are the two of them friends? Well, they both came to my student dorm over summer break, so maybe they met then?*

As he mulled everything over, he walked onto a relatively large road. The people going back and forth were staring in amazement at every little thing, like the wind-power-generating propellers, and that in turn felt new to Kamijou.

Then, suddenly, he heard a cat meow from nearby. He was used to the particular traits and qualities of that meow already—it was Sphinx, their calico.

“Index?” He stopped and looked toward where he’d heard the sound. There was a small park there, surrounded by buildings. The metal fence was higher than usual, giving it an intimidating air to keep people out. The entrance was overgrown with foliage, and he had a hard time seeing inside. The lack of vision made it seem even more forbidding.

Well, it makes sense, he thought. It wasn’t strictly a park. The metal fence had a sign nailed to it that said, PROPERTY OF TADAYAMA UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF BOTANY. It was for growing plants and collecting data on them. Given the heightened state of security during the Daihasei Festival and the lack of anyone patrolling the area, it seemed to be open but not really a place they’d want outsiders entering.

Then the familiar calico poked its head out of the brushwood. When it saw Kamijou, it pulled its head back in and ran farther inside. *Just the cat…? No, Index wouldn’t let him out of sight so easily. I guess that means she’s in there, too. Hmm…If they’re growing apples or something in there, then maybe she’d wander in.*

Knowing she’d flare up at him if she heard him say that, he decided to check inside. Careful not to break any of the tree branches blocking the way, he stepped in. “Indeeex? If you’re here, it would be great if you could say something…”

He went in farther, and when his vision cleared…

…Index was there.

In the middle of changing her clothes, for some reason.

“……”

Kamijou and Index locked eyes and froze.

In addition, Miss Komoe, wearing a cheerleading outfit, was facing Index, but she had her back turned, so she didn’t realize he was there.

That’s strange, he thought. The latest version of Index in his memory wore a teacup-like habit, white with gold embroidery. For some reason, the habit was neatly folded on the ground— Why was that? And why were panties of the same color on top of her habit?

Where had they gotten that short, pleated white skirt and light green tank top that looked like something a cheerleader would wear? She had on both those things right now, and Miss Komoe was in the same outfit.

However, she had just gotten a hand on her tank top to pull it down. Her breasts were ever so slightly poking out of the slanted edge of the clothing. On top of that, it was the very moment when Miss Komoe was in the middle of pulling up the cheerleading underwear (possibly the same thing that women wore in tennis).

The underwear was up to one of her thighs, and she was currently about to get her other foot through it as she froze. Of course, in that state, the skirt wasn't doing much for her. Cheerleading clothes didn't have much utility in "covering" anyway.

Once again, Index's habit was neatly folded and placed on the ground.

On top of that were panties of the same color.

If not for Miss Komoe's head as she was pulling up the underwear, he would have gotten a glimpse of something he would probably regret for a long time.

"…Ah…" After freezing temporarily in surprise, her expression slowly changed to one of anger, one that said, *I'm going to devour him this very instant*. Kamijou, naturally, was sweating all over and couldn't move. Miss Komoe had already finished changing into her cheerleading outfit, and only she was unaware of how they were acting. She talked to Index casually.

"I'm sorry! The rules say you can't use the official changing rooms unless you're actually a student. I didn't want to have you change in a place like this, but…Huh? Eek!"

Index didn't listen to everything she had to say. With her panties still hanging at her thigh, she surged forward toward Touma Kamijou. "Toumaaa!! I think maybe you should reflect and think about how many times this makes!!"

"Agh! I'm perfectly ready to apologize, but I won't let you eat any more of me than you already have!!" Kamijou managed to twist around to avoid Assault Girl Index's bite attack. Index's hands ended up behind him, and she grabbed onto his body, but though she was aiming for his head, her aim slipped a little.

Squooch. Index's mouth landed right on his cheek.

"Eegh…?!"

He felt her small but soft lips on him. The hardness was her top and bottom teeth, and the warmth must have been her tongue. Breath warmer than his body heat came to him, and he shuddered heavily at the subtle sensation of her saliva.

"…I— What— Index?!"

"…"

Kamijou shouted, his face bright red, but didn't get an answer.

Whoosh!! Index shot away from him without a word. He would have expected her to yell at him, but she stayed quiet and looked down so far he couldn't see her face—but she was red up to her ears. Maybe she was actually giving thought to the act of biting him, which she hadn't really paid much attention to before. Maybe she'd lost her head; she hadn't seemed to notice her own state of half-undress.

Kamijou looked at Miss Komoe, but she had her hands at her cheek, stammering words that weren't actually words. He couldn't expect anything from her. "I— Well, um, Miss…Miss Index? It's all right—it was an accident! Just an accident! We won't count that one, so don't get so serious about it…Wait, what?! Wait, Index, why did your face suddenly flip from embarrassment to your angry mode?! Did I say something I shouldn't have?!"

He took a few steps back as he looked at the cheerleading girl who started to tremble in silence, and at that moment…

"…Kamijou."

A cold female voice stabbed him in the back. Staying cautious of Index in her unpredictable state, he slowly turned around to look.

It was Seiri Fukiyose.

She was wearing her thin administrative committee parka over her gym clothes. "I was looking for Miss Komoe for administrative business, so when I heard voices I came this way…*and here we are again*."

She looked first at Kamijou and the shaking, half-naked Index; then at Miss Komoe, who was red-faced; then at the clothing and underwear, neatly folded and placed on the ground; and finally back at Index—or, more precisely, to the underwear hanging from her thigh.

“Was this why you weren’t with the rest of us rooting for our school? You traitor!”

With one hit from her fist, no supernatural abilities included, she slammed Touma Kamijou and put him on the ground.

5

Now covered in scrapes and bruises, Touma Kamijou left the park (well, the botanical laboratory) for now. Actually, it was more like Seiri Fukiyose dragged him out in a bout of righteous fury. Not by the hand, but by the back of his collar. Back there, Index was probably in the middle of changing clothes with Miss Komoe’s help.

“I swear. Can’t you put just a *little* effort into making this competition a success? I know that as the administrative committee member, I should be doing the most work, but seeing someone be as unmotivated as you makes me so mad!” While she spoke, she took an extra paper carton of milk out of her parka and started drinking it. She must have had low calcium levels thanks to her anger. Not in an “I hate you, Touma Kamijou” kind of bashful way, though; instead, she mercilessly conveyed her honest feelings.

Bsssshh. As Kamijou continued to be dragged along by his collar, he managed to say, “F-Fukiyose, is…is our school in a match right now…?”

“Why can’t you remember that yourself? Not enough nutrients in your brain? Yes, I get it. I understand. Then your top priority right now should be consuming some sugar!” she said, throwing her milk carton into a trash can, then fishing around in her parka pocket and bringing out a sugar stick used for coffee to hand to him.

“Eh?! That’s literally just sugar! With nothing else!” Kamijou’s shoulders jerked in surprise and he tried to run, but at that moment, Fukiyose put her arm around his neck. Then she completed her headlock with just her right arm by tucking Kamijou’s head under her armpit.

“For now, just wake up your sleeping brain. If you can’t, we can try a soybean isoflavone infusion. I trust you’re okay with soy-milk pudding!”

“Agh! If you would be so kind as to give me soy-milk pudding from the start, I would be in your debt! It would contain sugar, too!” Kamijou flailed as Fukiyose attempted to force the sugar stick down his throat, but with his head being fixed in place in her armpit, he didn’t actually move anywhere. Still, he continued his struggle. Suddenly, he felt something soft touch his right cheek.

It was one of her big breasts. *Ack?!* Kamijou began to resist three times as hard. Fukiyose must not have noticed what was happening, she was just frowning at the sugar stick in her hand. “Wait, just wait! I could fill myself up with just that and it wouldn’t fix how stupid I am!!”

“…Doesn’t it make you sad to say that about yourself?”

“It does not!” retorted Kamijou pathetically as he quickly tried to veer in a different direction. The bounciness of her breast amplified then, causing his entire body to lock up. Fukiyose, still looking dubious, sighed and released him from the headlock.

Thank God, said Kamijou, exhaling, when a moment later, she grabbed his collar and began dragging him right along again.

“Right now our school is doing two events: The second-year girls are doing the tug-of-war and the third-year boys are doing the best-pick triathlon. Which do you want to go cheer for? I bet the girls, right? I mean, that would make sense for Kamijou!”

“Your words—they hurt so much! How can you be so coolheaded all the time?! Does even your heart stay cool in the summer?!”

“Don’t give me that. It’ll take more than that to get past my defenses!”

But your defenses are cold as ice, retorted Kamijou to himself, but she obviously wasn’t going to laugh at that, so he kept his mouth shut.

“By the way, Fukiyose, are you okay with your committee work right now?”

“…You don’t have to keep worrying about every little thing concerning me, you know.”

“I guess this is what it’s like to be completely rejected…Isn’t your committee work, like, hard? Well, I mean, I don’t know what exactly you’re doing, but I was

just wondering if you really had the time to be bothering with an idiot like me."

From setting up and judging the competitions to broadcasting their starts, middles, and ends; dealing with lost children; and giving people simple directions, the administrative committee was assigned a wide variety of tasks during the Daihasei Festival. Plus they would have to compete as athletes themselves, too, so they had far less free time than normal students.

Fukiyose, though, gave him a sidelong glare. "It's fine. I told Miss Komoe. Besides, I made sure my schedule has some give in it to deal with unexpected situations like this, so there's no problem!"

"Seems like a waste. You should just leave me here and go around the food stalls with your friends or something."

"Everyone has their own ways of making things memorable. They agree with that, too!" For just a moment, the sharpness in her expression faded to something more normal.

Kamijou, still being dragged along, sighed. "Yeah, yeah…Doesn't matter to me, but could you stop dragging me like this?"

"All right, give me your hand," she said, letting go of his collar surprisingly easily, then offering her hand to him. Her palm looked soft, like she used hand cream. It was probably one of those coenzyme Q10s or a health fad relentlessly advertised on television.

"Oh, well. Uhh, right. Thanks." He thought for a moment, but decided to take her hand anyway. He figured it would be cold, but it was warmer than he'd thought. He felt his heart thump in slight surprise just from that simple fact.

Fukiyose gave him a glance, then said, "You walk too slowly."

"…" Touma Kamijou sighed and wondered what he was getting all excited for as the ironclad, unhappy Seiri Fukiyose started to pull him away by the hand.

6

They walked through the city, Fukiyose tugging Kamijou along.

The crowd was especially thick around this area. The cause seemed to be a

cluster of traffic locations like subway stations and automatic bus terminals all in one place. People were going in every direction, making transfers from trains to buses or from bus line A to bus line B.

He noted they'd gained a lot of distance from where they'd parted with Index. Fukiyose seemed to want to get Kamijou to come root for their school, but right now, he'd have to take action immediately if any word came from Tsuchimikado or Stiyl, who were tracking Oriana separately. *Help, I don't know what to do*, he worried to himself.

"Hey, Kamijou. Does the Daihasei Festival bore you?" Fukiyose said suddenly, still holding his hand.

"Huh?" Kamijou frowned.

"You seem rather restless, like your mind is on something else entirely!"

He gulped.

Fukiyose saw him gulp and continued. "Well, I can't force you to focus only on the festival, and I can't stop you if you want to drop out of it…"

She didn't seem to have suspicions that something else was going on behind the scenes of the festival. She just had doubts as to where Kamijou was directing his focus.

"Still, and it may seem selfish, but seeing as how I've worked hard to plan for today, I want everyone to participate and have a good time that they can look back on and remember fondly. If everyone's happy with that, then great…but if you feel like today's been boring, then it means I haven't done enough to prepare for this, that's all."

"…You've got a strong sense of responsibility. Don't worry, I don't think it's boring. Crazy events like this are best if you let yourself go crazy, too, you know?" Kamijou didn't know why Fukiyose was on the administrative committee for the festival. However, it seemed that not only did she nominate herself rather than be forced into it, she had a reason for wanting to make everything a success. A reason that meant spending time until late after school and forgoing free time with her other friends.

But there was something she didn't know. Sorcerers were out there right now

trying to take advantage of those kinds of feelings. She didn't know about their secret efforts to come to a deal on the Stab Sword, nor about all the different opinions and purposes clashing both inside and outside the city walls.

I'll have to do my best, he thought. *Fukiyose's not the only one. All the administrative committee members are trying to make the festival a success. The students walking around, too, and even the people from outside who came to watch—all they want is a memory they can look back on fondly. So I need to do my best.*

Fukiyose peered at his face dubiously. "…I guess I can't do anything about the fact that you're thinking about other things."

"What? No, that's not it! I am super pumped for this. You're plunging into your angry zone for no reason, Fukiyose!!"

Fukiyose was quickly losing her sparkle to her displeased irritation. Still holding her hand, the flustered Kamijou went in front of her, looked her in the eye, and was about to answer her…

…when someone bumped into him from behind.

The sidewalk was so crowded that someone's shoulder must have bumped him.

Ack! He couldn't immediately react to it, and he took a step forward by accident. That brought his face a lot closer to Fukiyose's.

Actually, there were only about thirty centimeters between their faces in the first place.

"Ack…!!"

"Huh…?!"

In less than a moment after they cried out, the distance between them shrank to zero. With a loud *thud*, their foreheads rammed into each other. The tips of their noses touched a little, too. Their lips didn't, but he felt her light breathing on his.

Wha…?

Kamijou stopped breathing despite himself.

“Get away from me, Touma Kamijou!”

A moment later, Fukiyose delivered a hard head-butt to him.

“Ack— Whoa?!”

His entire upper body reeled back. His hand, which had been in hers before, jerked back. He felt heat rising to his face. Fukiyose’s expression didn’t seem to change too much, but it *was* gradually being painted over in more and more anger.

“…I suppose Touma Kamijou is still Touma Kamijou even when people are trying to talk seriously to him.”

“Th-that’s not it! I was trying to think seriously, too!!”

“This is one of those cases, isn’t it? All the time in the world wouldn’t be enough for me to open up to you.”

He groaned. “I feel like I’ve been destroyed by Fukiyose’s chilliness!” he shouted without meaning to. Fukiyose’s palm came right at the back of his head and smacked it. *Her retorts lack that sense of affection*, he thought, rubbing his head and lowering it in apology, when just then…

…*bloof*.

This time, as he lowered his head, it suddenly ran into something soft. He calmly assessed the situation and saw that it was a woman’s breasts.

“Oowahhh?!”

He hastily pulled back. *What the hell is going on here?!* he thought, surprised once again. The woman he bumped into, though, went, “Whoopsies,” and didn’t seem to mind it very much. He heard Fukiyose rumble out a low “Kamijou…” that sounded like evil spirits were leaving her mouth.

The woman he’d run into was dressed in a plain work outfit and was about eighteen or nineteen years old. She might have been the same age as Kaori Kanzaki. She was taller than Kamijou, too. The phrase “tall for a Japanese” might have worked for her, but her bright blond hair and blue eyes suggested the evaluation might not have been accurate. Seiri Fukiyose was particularly good-looking among his classmates, but this woman’s sexiness far outshone Fukiyose’s

looks. Her simple physical features like her chest and waist were great, but he felt some kind of invisible charm about her.

Her long blond hair seemed to be fixed up with quite a bit of wax or a curling iron or something. In all, she had a hairstyle where a curling iron had been used on thin bundles of hair, combined into three thick bundles of many strands coiling around one another. There were several other parts of it that had their own thing going on, so the style was very difficult to classify. On the other hand, there were no accessories in it. It was more like her blond hair itself had been made into a decoration.

Dried paint was stuck all over her work outfit as if she was related to the painting industry. Her hands were barely long enough for one to hold the bottom part of a signboard under her arm.

However…

"Wow…"

…he was not the one to accidentally murmur something: Fukiyose did it instead.

The woman's work outfit was the kind you buttoned up in the front, but it was wide-open. Some wore those things with the top two buttons open, but not her—the *only* button not open was that second one. It gave a blindingly clear view of her belly button and enormous cleavage. Kamijou thought it almost seemed like a swimsuit in that regard.

Her pants were fairly loose as well, like they were just hanging from her hips. He didn't feel like going around behind her to check, but a little bit of her butt may have been showing from out of the low pants hem.

She was certainly exposing quite a bit, but it had an added layer of another kind of danger, like the slightest wrong move would send her clothes flying off. She had confidence in her body, which, to Kamijou at least, put her in a different category than the jersey-wearing, big-breasted Anti-Skill lady.

The painter woman used her free hand to make a gesture of apology and, in surprisingly fluent Japanese, said, "Oh, whoops! Sorry about that. I'm just not used to this kind of crowd! Does it hurt anywhere? Oh, there? The back of your head?"

Kamijou groaned. "You're not actually right, but you're being so nice it's

infecting me and I might just let you have me…”

Seiri Fukiyose shut one eye at his tearful response and brought another fist down to the back of his head. And, in so doing, sent Kamijou plunging into the painter woman’s breasts again. She didn’t scream or anything; she just used one hand to peel him off her slowly.

“There we go. Are you okay now? You really *mustn’t* fight so much. Festivals don’t come around very often, so it would be wise to use this time to make some fun memories, right?”

Kamijou’s entire look burst into an expression on the verge of tears. “You have such a good heart! I can’t even compare you to a certain biting girl or this punching girl! I think I’d like to drown myself in your kindness!”

“Oh my. Your pickup lines could use a little work—saying you loved me after looking at only what would benefit you.”

This jerk, said Fukiyose’s eyes as she glared at him. The painter woman smiled thinly and bowed a little in apology. “Oh, oops. I apologize to you as well.”

Fukiyose looked surprised. “Wh-why would you say sorry to me?”

“Well, because I suppose I indirectly caused this, perhaps?”

The girl winced at the too-relaxed, adult words. Kamijou thought to himself: *Look—that’s what a real woman is like; did you see it? Learn from her! Use her as a reference and stop being so straitlaced!!* A moment later, Fukiyose belted out an aikido throwing technique and planted him in the ground.

She looked at the boy being held to the ground and the girl holding him there and called out, “Umm, I suppose you’re all right? You both seem plenty energetic.” Then she came out with one hand, looking for a handshake. “I do apologize for running into you. I assume in Japan you would bow your head, but where I come from we generally do it like this.”

“Huh…Is that right?”

“Oh. Would you rather have a kiss?”

Kamijou nearly exploded. After the innocent boy trembled for a few moments, he replied, “Yes! I would like that very much!!”

The words had barely left his mouth before Seiri Fukiyose rocked him with a fist to his temple. His head spun. The painter woman smiled and offered her hand again.

I wonder if Index could stop biting and learn a more gentle, cultured approach like this, thought Kamijou as he took her right hand *in his right hand*.

Shwaaack!!

There was an odd sound, almost like something was breaking.

“Huh?”

That was neither Kamijou nor the woman, but Seiri Fukiyose who was watching them. The two people shaking hands both knew what had just happened, so they didn’t say anything.

Touma Kamijou was busy recalling *the power in his right hand* anyway.

And the painter woman was busy figuring out *what had just broken*.

“Whoopsies!” The woman forced a dry smile but failed even at that. “I should really be getting back to my work. May I go now?” she asked.

And then she left without waiting for a reply. There was nothing different about the way she acted or moved, but that air about her that had earlier felt like composure was gone.

Fukiyose, who had her own hand still sitting in the air waiting, tilted her head. “…Huh? No handshake for me? What do you think, Touma Kamijou?”

“What? Maybe she just didn’t like you and— *Gaahh?!*”

His deflection earned him a full-force head-butt.

Fukiyose heaved a very heavy sigh and went to grab Kamijou’s hand to lead him off somewhere else again, but just then her cell phone ringtone began to play. It sounded like it was from the administrative committee; businesslike words left Fukiyose’s lips. As far as he could tell from the way they were speaking in hushed tones, it seemed like some trouble had come up. She looked at Kamijou, then at the time display on her phone. She left him with the very committee-like “The bread-eating race is next, so you’d better not be late!” He watched her leave, her phone in one hand, then rubbed the cheek he’d been

punched in earlier.

Then he thought. What had he just canceled out? A supernatural power or sorcery? After thinking for a few moments, he decided it wasn't as likely to be a supernatural ability. Espers were all from Academy City and were simply students. The woman seemed like a worker from outside the city, given her painting work outfit, and the manufacturer logo on it sealed the deal—he'd seen the name from time to time on TV. And, of course, none of the students in the city had a way to acquire such clothing. Which meant…

Touma Kamijou got out his cell phone. He looked around to make sure Fukiyose was gone. He figured asking her about it wouldn't be the right thing to do, since Anti-Skill or Judgment acting would apparently be a problem. He dialed Motoharu Tsuchimikado's number.

"Heya, Kammy. Busy pullin' the wool over Index's eyes, nya? We're looking for nice, insecure spots where Oriana could make the deal, but there's way more in District 7 than we thought. If you could just keep Index away from that area for now, that would be great—"

"Never mind that. I need to ask something, Tsuchimikado."

Tsuchimikado lowered his tone, catching on to the quickness of Kamijou's speech. "…What is it?"

"What was it again? The something-or-other sword, the magic item. We're supposed to be stopping them from making a deal with it, right?" Kamijou looked at the crowd. He could still see the back of her dressed-down work clothing.

"The Stab Sword. And it's not an item, it's a Soul Arm. Wait, why? You getting cold feet on us, Kammy? You know we won't be getting any backup here."

"Is that true?"

"…Not sure what you mean, Kammy."

Kamijou straightened, making sure not to let the woman out of his sight. Then the woman turned a corner. "I shook hands with somebody and the Imagine Breaker destroyed something. I don't know what. But she doesn't seem like a student. She dresses like she's not from the city."

“Wait. Kammy. I have to ask. Was she carrying anything big? The Stab Sword is a meter and a half long, and each side of the guard goes out thirty-five centimeters. Something that could hide a huge sword…? Not sure what, since I don’t think it’d fit in a suitcase…”

Kamijou’s face paled. “She was.”

“What was it?”

“A signboard? It was, like, this big sign, wrapped in a white cloth—”

“Kammy, where are you right now?”

“What? Oh, uhh…I’m in front of the Ichizai Bank.”

“Wait right there,” he heard before the phone hung up.

He stared at the phone. Should he follow the woman or wait here for Tsuchimikado? He thought a little, then sprinted off toward where the painter lady had gone. They’d lose her for sure if he waited for Tsuchimikado.

He had a premonition—something was beginning.

And he knew that it wasn’t going to be anything festive.

7

With the big sign under her arm, the blond woman wearing her work uniform casually weaved in and out of the crowds. She knew she was on edge. She thought she was choosing her movements and actions carefully. Unfortunately, she couldn’t completely deal with her emotions now that something unexpected had happened.

She stuck her empty hand into her pants pocket. Her pants pulled down a tiny bit when she did, but it didn’t bother her. From out of her pocket she produced a ring of flash card–like pieces of paper. Nothing was written on them, though. The white pasteboard cards simply hung from a metal ring.

“Mm…” She bit off one of the cards, ripping the paper from the ring. Then writing appeared on it like color on litmus paper. It read WATER SYMBOL in cursive, gold English letters.

The *symbol of water* reacted to the *golden* ink and spun.

She returned the ring of cards to her pocket, then took the card out of her mouth and placed it to her ear like a conch. “Testing! Hello? This is *Oriana Thomson*. Are you getting this? If you are, I’d appreciate it if you said something.”

In response to her talking to herself, the card pressed to her ear spoke *in a voice that didn’t vibrate the air*.

“Please refrain from using your real name. Take into account the potential danger if your physical voice were to leak out and be overheard. If you revealed your true identity, we could find ourselves in a difficult situation.”

The voice was polite and well mannered.

Very well mannered. The woman calling herself Oriana smiled drily. “I’ve already run into a bit of trouble. I do find ad-libbed comedy routines far more of a turn-on, but that wouldn’t be a very pleasing situation for you, would it? *Lidvia Lorenzetti.*”

The person she was talking to, whom she called Lidvia Lorenzetti, was silent, but only for a moment. “Please refrain from such obscene expressions. I have been strictly ordered to go along with you for religious reasons, after all.”

“Oh, right. Tantalizing yourselves with abstinence is what you nuns like best, isn’t it? I suppose gentle verbal abuse is a little too rough for you. Have you heard this, by the way? Scientifically speaking, martyred saints seeing angels at the end of their lives could be a manifestation of masochistic ecstasy.”

“…”

“Oh? I guess you’re not into scientific conversations. I hadn’t pegged you for one of those who would cover her ears if someone started talking about how the Church’s operating procedures make use of mass psychology.”

“…That is not what I am concerned about…,” said the other person before trailing off, seeming annoyed.

Oriana, finally, started to feel dismayed. There was no point in calling her like this. “I guess I was fooling around too much, *young lady*. I apologize if I offended you.”

“I believe you are younger than I am…”

“Yes, but you’re still a young lady. No matter how old you get. Growing old as a young lady is the ambition of all nuns, isn’t it?”

“As one dedicated to honest poverty, I believe a rich-sounding title like *signorina* ill befits me. And you, too, have taken up the Bible, have you not? When someone enters the family of our Lord, a nun must—”

Same lecture as usual. Oriana sighed. Lidvia Lorenzetti was the exemplary disciple of Roman Orthodoxy. She mainly grew passionate when praying or spreading the word. Oriana listened inattentively and waited for a chance. “Right, so in terms of the trouble I’m having—”

“It is judged a crime of adultery against our Lord should we engage in sexual relations with another, for all nuns are the brides of the Son of God…Oh, but my lecture—”

Oriana shrugged off the *can wait* and spoke. “Essentially, *that spell* I used on myself got all broken.”

That spell.

The name of the single-time use was Silent Coin.

Oriana had used it as a sort of insurance. A spell to sap the energy of those who wanted to chase her. It wouldn’t have any effect if she were actually engaged in a conversation with someone. Just turning her back, though, would make the person think it wasn’t worth stopping her or that it could wait until next time. They wouldn’t, under any circumstances, call out to her after that. This sorcery was a configuration of the “vacate,” or warding, spell that operated on a similar principle to an Opila rune barrier.

As long as the spell was active, Oriana could make balls of flame appear in her palms or whatever else, and nobody would feel like calling her out for it. That’s why she was using it—so she could get this “deal” finished without worry, but… for various reasons, Oriana was unable to reconstruct the spell now that it had broken.

“Oh…What was the direct cause of it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well then, what should we do about it?”

“Don’t know that, either.”

“…”

“Ahh, don’t hang up on me! I’m not into the silent treatment.”

“Then I would like to hear your alternative plan for what to do at this point.”

“Let’s see,” she said, smiling.

“…First, I’ll shake off this boy behind me.”

8

As Touma Kamijou watched the woman in the work uniform—probably the smuggler Oriana Thomson—she suddenly turned around a corner.

…Did she notice me?!

Still, not losing sight of her came first. Kamijou stopped his poor attempt at tailing the woman and began to run among and around people. People weren’t gathered on his route, thankfully—there might have been TV cameras set up somewhere else.

He swung around the building at the intersection.

The blond hair was fluttering farther away than he’d expected. He accelerated, passing by children holding balloons and couples holding hands. *Guess it’s a good thing I’m wearing this gym uniform*, he thought. It wasn’t made of special high-tech aerodynamic material, but it was a lot easier to move around in than his school uniform would have been.

Despite essentially running at full speed, he didn’t draw strange glances from others. Maybe they were mistaking him for being in a scavenger-hunt race or something. As he thought about it, he steadily increased in speed. He was now easily a kilometer away from where he had first bumped into her and parted from Fukiyose. Not to mention the botanical laboratory where Index had been changing. *That* was so far away now if he was to walk back to it.

Then, he heard his cell phone ringtone from his pocket. Running while talking would take too much energy. Kamijou considered deciding whether to pick up based on who was calling him, but then he saw it was Motoharu Tsuchimikado. He quickly picked up.

“Kammy, where are you?! Why didn’t you wait where you were?!”

“Sorry! I was going to lose sight of her otherwise!” As he spoke, the work uniform disappeared around another corner about twenty meters ahead of him. He sprinted the length of the sidewalk, heading for the corner.

“Shit. Then where are you now?”

As Kamijou rounded the bend, he groaned. It was a narrow road that split into three different paths. He listened carefully and ran after the footsteps he heard —straight ahead. “I’m…There’s no good point of reference! I’ll give you my GPS code in a text. You do the search!!”

GPS-enabled cell phones provided a service to find where friends were. This required, however, that the person who wanted to be searched for send a special code in a text message. The code was changed every thirty minutes. After he sent the necessary code to Tsuchimikado’s cell phone so his friend could locate him, he hung up. He left the phone on, of course, to let the GPS do its thing.

He ran down the narrow path for a while. It was longer than he thought it would be. The small cracks between the buildings got even smaller, to the point where he couldn’t see inside them. As he went farther and farther, he finally heard footsteps and the voices of a crowd.

“Whoa!!” When he burst out of the path, he found himself on another main street. He quickly scanned his surroundings. Oriana was running from left to right across a pedestrian walkway over the road. *That’s pretty far. About fifty meters away, maybe?* She was absurdly fast, considering the big signboard (or whatever it was she might have been hiding) was tucked under one arm.

Kamijou darted after her.

Fortunately, the giant sign stuck out among the people, so she couldn’t just blend in right away. Still, the fact that she could drop out of sight at any moment

made Kamijou focus on her completely. His tunnel vision practically made him stumble on the smallest bumps in the road, never mind watching the people walking around him.

"Shit!"

He cried out, pushing himself to run farther, when *bam*—something slapped him on the back.

It was Motoharu Tsuchimikado and Stiyl Magnus.

They'd gotten here quickly.

They hadn't come from behind him but from a small road cutting across. They'd probably seen where he was, predicted what direction he was moving in, and taken a shortcut.

"Which one, Kammy? You said the Stab Sword was disguised as a signboard, right?"

Kamijou gasped for air. "That one…The blond woman wearing the work outfit," he managed, pointing.

Tsuchimikado and Stiyl ran off together. Leaving him there—maybe they were telling him this was their job now, as professionals. Nevertheless, without pausing to catch his breath, he ran after the two of them.

How persistent…!

Oriana looked over her shoulder and privately clicked her tongue. She had fifty meters on him, but that was also *all* she had. She'd worked pretty hard to choose small roads that seemed easy to get lost on so that he'd lose sight of her, but it had been completely ineffective.

Her current painter's outfit combined with the "signboard" gave others the impression that she was on the job. If only she didn't have the sign, she could go into a hotel or department store or restaurant and they'd just think she'd come there on her break…but if she was to walk in the guests' front door of any of those places, the people working there would probably say something. She wouldn't be able to explain why she was fleeing even if they asked, and having to get rid of employee after employee would make her stand out all the more.

Still, if she wanted to go in through a staff entrance in back, she'd need a key or an ID. All of which meant she was forced to use roads—one of the reasons she was finding it difficult to throw off pursuit. However, the fact that she had so much distance and he was *still* on her tail seemed a bit strange.

And by the time she noticed this, she also noticed that she now had three pursuers, not just one.

Considering how the first was tailing her, he must have been an amateur. After the two new ones came, though, their work became much more accurate. They were probably professionals. They were trying to read her mind, to predict what routes she'd take to flee.

I heard Academy City and even the whole Church can't do anything in this city right now, but I guess the reality is more difficult than that…Whoops!

Oriana stopped dead in her tracks. There must have been TV cameras ahead, because there was a much denser crowd in front of her. She couldn't get through them with the "giant signboard" in her hand. It would get caught on the human wall, and she'd get stuck. And, of course, abandoning the "signboard" and diving in would be completely counterproductive.

She looked around. *It'll be a little tough, but going through* there *would be safest, I think…*

She thought, she calculated, and she decided to veer to the side and take another route.

Tsuchimikado was the fastest of them, with Stiyl in the middle and Kamijou trailing behind. Kamijou was already exhausted from running, of course—he would probably outpace Stiyl normally.

Oriana suddenly stopped running about thirty meters ahead of them in the middle of the road, looked around, and went onto a different road. Tsuchimikado frowned as he ran.

"That seems way different from what she's been doing, nya…Did she change her mind?" he wondered aloud, not breathing particularly hard. He was going so fast Kamijou would be out of the running if he so much as stumbled. He encouraged his legs to continue and followed in Tsuchimikado's wake.

When they got to where Oriana had stopped, they noticed TV cameras ahead of them. A reporter's voice filtered through the crowd, giving an excited explanation that any local would know was off the mark. People were packed in like a rush-hour train around the reporter. Oriana must have changed her route out of concern for being caught up in there.

Kamijou looked in the direction she'd run. "…What's that? A bus terminal?"

Before them was a ground covered in asphalt.

It was a flat, square place, enclosed perfectly by buildings on all sides. It seemed like a place that had been leveled hurriedly, someone having dismantled an unneeded structure for some Daihasei Festival requirement.

It was around thirty meters wide and a few hundred deep, but it didn't seem "wide" or "open" in the least: for there was a ton of large buses squeezed into the place like they were ready to be loaded onto a big tanker. They couldn't see all the way back from here, but it looked like somewhere from fifty to seventy buses were parked here. Metal pillars stood in several places, connecting the whole facility to a giant roof of galvanized iron or something. There were all sorts of metal robotic arms hanging from the ceiling, like the kinds used in car factories to build vehicles.

All of these vehicles were driverless, automatic buses. This was probably a temporary service facility for buses loaded with self-driving units. They, too, would have to leave their posts for maintenance at some point, whether it was for cleaning or gas refueling. These buses were basically waiting on the sidelines as they underwent repairs.

They were used only during the Daihasei Festival, and this big facility had been constructed for that purpose alone. It gave Kamijou a newfound appreciation for the sheer scale of the event.

One bus, with the words OUT OF SERVICE on its display, passed by them almost silently and proceeded deeper into the facility. Tsuchimikado grabbed onto the back of the slowly moving bus and used it to enter the facility just as silently. But the very moment he stepped inside…

Roar!!

Suddenly, a pale blue explosive flame plunged down from the ceiling.

The unnaturally colored flame came hurtling straight down at Tsuchimikado as though it were being channeled through an invisible tube. It was a sorcery-based attack, probably—and not Stiyl's, of course, despite his using flames often. Who had fired it, then?

"Shit, she decided to set a trap to crush us instead! Get down, Kammy!"

Tsuchimikado immediately jumped back and tried to push Kamijou down, but…

"What are you saying? This is his cue, isn't it?"

…right before he could, Stiyl grabbed the back of Kamijou's neck and hurled him forward.

"What?"

Kamijou looked up to see the pillar of flame descending on him like a guillotine.

"What?! Hey, no! You gotta be kidding me!!" He frantically thrust his right fist upward like an uppercut. The pale blue pillar of flame scattered in all directions, fading away without burning anything.

The cigarette in the corner of Stiyl's mouth wiggled. "I must say, you are quite the team player. We have a nice division of roles; things are easy to understand and easy to deal with."

"Y-you…you…!!" Kamijou trembled, moments away from grabbing the red-haired priest.

"Come on, do the rest of your job now."

Bam! Kamijou found himself kicked ahead again.

Whoosh!! The sound of something splitting through the air. A clump of earth about the size of a baseball came *under the frame of the self-driving bus* that was put-putting along ahead of them. Then, with a metallic noise, a ton of stone spikes came out of the ball, making it look like a sea urchin. It abruptly hopped up, shooting for Kamijou's chin.

"Hey, wait, what's going on?!" He instantly stuck out his right hand, and the stone bullet shattered like ice and faded into the air. Tsuchimikado and Stiyl had

both jumped to either side to use the parked automatic buses as walls. Kamijou, quickly developing trust issues, didn't hesitate to go over to Tsuchimikado's side.

Tsuchimikado, with his back to the side of the bus, looked at Stiyl, who was pressed against the side of the bus across the maintenance path. "Stiyl. You put up your rune cards and wait here, nya. I'll keep going and take down the smuggler."

"All right. Should I use Opila?"

"Sure. I don't want to put any more mana in the air than we need to, but it'll be worse if this all spreads. As long as Index doesn't head our way, we should be fine."

Kamijou started to have doubts as the two professionals talked between themselves. "Hey, wouldn't it be faster if we all went after her?"

"Kammy, when there're this many obstacles, we could end up going the wrong way. When you're after someone, it's a basic tactic to close down as many exits as possible."

"Oh." Kamijou finally realized what he meant. They weren't in a slugging match—this battle was about catching her before she got away. It was a different objective that called for different tactics.

Tsuchimikado looked at him. "What'll you do, Kammy? It'd probably be safe just to stay here…"

Stiyl gave him a smirk. "I like that. I agree; it'll be safer if you stay. Not for your safety but for mine."

Kamijou flung an empty can at his feet at Stiyl and decided to move forward with Tsuchimikado. He peeked around the side of the bus down the maintenance path and then leaped out at full speed. Kamijou followed right behind him, figuring his Imagine Breaker placed him in the front as a shield.

But then there was a *slam!!* From straight ahead, yellow spears of fire shot toward them. They were ten meters ahead, having suddenly appeared where there was only empty air before. When Kamijou stuck out his right hand, a guillotine made of highly compressed air came for him from the gaps in the buses to either side.

“?!” He faltered for a moment, and Tsuchimikado grabbed him by the collar. Then, dragging him in his wake, he ran on farther, dodging the guillotines to either side and twisting around the arcing flames ahead. When he let go of his collar, he said, “Kammy, don’t feel like you need to take them all on! They’re just to buy her time. If you try and deal with them all, she’ll get away!!”

“Okay, I get it, but…!!” Five big balls of ice the size of advertisement balloons were falling on them from the ceiling. He desperately fought back the urge to use his right hand and just kept running straight ahead. He felt the roars and tremors as the giant masses shattered on the ground. It sent a chill down his spine.

They shot past a line of buses. Several big washing machines for the buses came into view. They were about as high as a two-story building and had all the machines necessary to wash a vehicle on the inside. Instead of the roller brushes you might find at a gas station, they used giant, flat sponge things that utilized supersonic vibration.

Once they got behind it, they caught a glimpse of long, fluttering blond hair.

“There she is!!” As soon as Kamijou got behind the buses, a line of the ground in front of him burst upward to block him from the washing machines. The wall of earth stretched five meters high, then came crashing toward the three of them like an avalanche. The wall of earth stretched from one end of the service facility to the other. They couldn’t avoid it, and if they hid behind the buses, they’d be crushed along with them. Above all, if the metal pillars supporting the roof broke, the entire facility could come toppling down on them.

“Kammy, you’re up! It’s made of temporary matter, like ectoplasm—your hand can wipe out the whole thing!!”

As Tsuchimikado called out, Kamijou jumped in front. He felt his teeth start to chatter at the enormous opponent, but he couldn’t run away crying in this situation. He dove toward the root of the mudslide and shoved his right hand into it without a second thought.

There was a loud *shwshhh!!* With the sound of glass shattering, the five-meter-high wall of earth came crumbling down. It appeared to melt into thin air, and after it vanished nothing was left. The asphalt below them returned to normal, too. Before Kamijou could pull back his right arm, Tsuchimikado ran by him and

disappeared behind the big washing machines. Kamijou followed, rounding the obstacles in a single burst.

Then he stopped. Oriana wasn't there.

A piece of thick paper about the size of a stick of gum, like one you'd find on a ring of flash cards, was all that was left, hanging on the washing machine wall. Kamijou overtook Tsuchimikado, who had stopped, and looked around. There was a small exit hidden in the shadows of the washing machines. A few steps away, though, a manhole cover was open—plus, the glass windows of the building were broken. Basically, there was no way to know which route she'd actually used to flee.

"Oriana Thomson, the Route Disturber…Goddamn it!!"

Tsuchimikado tore off the paper on the wall, his display of anger informing the amateur Kamijou just how bad the situation was.

*All right, then. I do hope that threw them off…*Oriana Thomson gave a glance over her shoulder as she walked onto a main road. She'd stopped running as soon as she'd completely lost sight of her pursuers. If they had lost sight of her, too, then it was more important not to be discovered again than to gain extra distance. A full-speed sprint would be rash. She'd stand out like a sore thumb in the crowds.

Still, it was getting to her. As she held the "signboard" wrapped in white cloth under her arm, she looked behind her once more…*I may have gotten rid of them for now, but that doesn't mean it's over. It might be better if I ready the next move…Whoops!*

She'd been so focused on what was behind her that she ran into someone walking right in front of her. The sensation she received through her exposed navel was not one of human skin but of metal. She'd run into a pair of male festival committee students carrying a pole with a basket on the end that would be used in a high-toss game—said pole was now on the ground.

"Oh, whoopsies. I'm so sorry!" She apologized lightly and left the scene. The male students got one look at her cleavage and tensed up a bit, offering awkward responses. *Wet under the ears*, she thought with a little smile. *It means the "**trick**" for that purpose is doing quite well. Maybe I should get them*

into a little more trouble, she mouthed, whispering to herself.

After that, Tsuchimikado took out his cell phone and called someone. It seemed to be Stiyl. They were both sorcerers, but Tsuchimikado couldn't use magic. Well, strictly speaking he *could*, but he was an esper as well; using magic would trigger a rejection response and could create little explosions inside his body.

After telling him to come over here right away, Tsuchimikado stuck the phone back into his pocket.

Kamijou looked at the thick piece of paper in Tsuchimikado's hand. "Hey, what is that, anyway?"

"Huh? It's the Soul Arm Oriana's using, nya~," he replied in a somewhat irritated voice, showing Kamijou the paper. There were blue letters on it—it was cursive, so it was hard for him to read, but it said Soil Symbol in English. He got terrible grades in English class, so he had no idea what it meant.

Tsuchimikado translated it for him. "You know how RPGs and stuff have the five major elements? Like fire, water, earth, and wind. It's that."

"…Then this is like an earth talisman? I don't get it."

"No, *that's not all it is*. The color attributed to earth is green, but she wrote the word in blue, right?" Tsuchimikado spun the paper around. "Blue is the color attributed to water. Normally, it can't be used for earth magic. If she wanted to use earth, she would have used green or the discus, since they're more compatible. It's like how Stiyl uses red cards to control flame."

"…Did she mess up?"

"Of course not. She's doing it on purpose. She sets up the not-quite-right colors on purpose, then transforms the recoil from it into attack power. In terms of *wu xing*—the five traditional Chinese elements—she's using the order of overcoming interaction, with earth overcoming water. Bad compatibility breeds bad results, basically."

As they were talking, Stiyl came running to them from the other part of the service facility.

Tsuchimikado waved the paper in front of him. “Got the mana call. If she was remote-controlling this while running, then she was probably transmitting mana back and forth. I’d like to use this to make a tracing spell. Could you help me out, nya?”

9

Tsuchimikado’s body didn’t allow him to use sorcery. More precisely, if he did, it would go out of control. Human stamina wasn’t quantified with numbers like it was in video games, so there was no specific number of times he could use magic and still endure it. Sometimes he could hold out for four or five castings, and sometimes he’d die on the first.

It was essentially a game of Russian roulette. As long as he wasn’t absolutely sure he could bring things to a conclusion in one strike, Tsuchimikado seemed to completely refrain from using magic. Everyone knew what would happen if he was incapacitated on the battlefield. He wasn’t going to be the one using the tracing spell.

He placed on the ground the card Oriana had left. Then *all he did* was draw circles around it and position origami of all colors nearby. It was apparently Stiyl’s job to actually trigger the magic.

“The spell’s name is Four Ways to Truth…Man, I wish we could’ve used this during Angel Fall, nya. I was already a wreck from the defensive spell I used to escape its effects, and Zaky’s bad at drawing barriers. It was a disaster! And of course, I couldn’t teach spells to someone from Russian Catholicism—another denomination entirely…”

“Why not work your hands instead of your mouth? Didn’t you say the search range isn’t even three kilometers?”

“Oops, you’re right. Okay, Kammy, stand back. This won’t mean much if your right hand busts Four Ways to Truth.”

Kamijou, a little startled, took a few steps back. After placing markings on the ground here and there, Tsuchimikado backed away as well and stood next to him.

On the ground was a black circle about fifty centimeters across. In the middle was the card Oriana had stuck on the side of the washing machine. Four pieces of newly made origami each sat at ninety degrees within the circle—blue, white, red, and black—dividing the circle into four parts. It looked like it was separating east, west, south, and north.

Stiyl knelt down by the circle Tsuchimikado had drawn, then placed his hands together and shut his eyes as if praying. A small bead of sweat trickled down his brow.

"CBTW, CNABTWTTL. (Carried by the wind, conveying not air but the will to the location.)"

With his words, the four pieces of origami moved despite there being no wind. Like puppets controlled by an unskilled puppeteer, they wafted upward. Each of the colored papers stood upright, then paused abruptly. Their edges evoked images of sharp blades.

"Runes work by coloring and decoloring," said Tsuchimikado, watching the circle on the ground. "One carves out meaningful characters, triggers the spell by coloring the grooves with power, and turns it off by decoloring it. Stiyl uses cards that he colored in advance—using a method called printing—so he's crazy fast at activating spells. Plus, he can just burn the card and skip the decoloring process entirely, nya. It *does* mean he can only use spells that he 'colored in' beforehand, but…"

The four papers danced around above the circle. Each time they drew a smooth line through it, it would draw a curved line of the same color on the ground. *Scritch, scratch, scritch, scratch.* The circle grew narrower, little by little, moving toward the card in the middle Oriana had left them.

"As long as you follow the fundamental rule of coloring and decoloring, then you can actually get pretty far away from the runic alphabet, futhark, and still have the sorcery work, nya! We may call them all runic characters, but there were a few different types of them depending on what time period you look at."

Fifteen centimeters remained until the circle closed in at the middle.

Kamijou watched the four swiftly revolving pieces of origami. "So if you use this, you can figure out exactly where Oriana is?"

“Well, within three kilometers it’ll pinpoint her, nya. If she’s gotten outside that range, though, we won’t get anything out of it.”

“…Three kilometers. That’s kinda far. Even if we found her almost exactly three kilometers away, she’d just move somewhere else while we were trying to catch up.”

“There’s one more bit to all this. Once you use Four Ways to Truth, you need about fifteen minutes to let it cool down before using it again, nya! Which is no problem if we get it the first time, nya~.”

Tsuchimikado seemed confident, but what if they failed? “Fifteen minutes. That sounds like a short time, but if she uses a train or a bus, we’re sunk.”

“We don’t really care *how* she decides to flee. Did you forget already, Kammy? I’m a sorcerer, too. I can use it only once, but I’ve got Red Style if we need it.”

Ten centimeters until the center of the circle.

Kamijou gave him a sour look. “Wait…That’s the one you used to destroy my house from the beach house to stop Angel Fall, isn’t it? I guess if you could use a long-distance artillery move like that…But wait. If you use sorcery in the open in Academy City like that, all the other sorcerers waiting outside could use it as an excuse to break in, right?”

“No, they couldn’t, Kammy. Their excuse needs to be that they’re acting to protect civilians from the evil sorcerer that snuck into the city. If I ended the whole thing in one attack, they would just have to say this to get their hands on the wreckage of the Stab Sword: *The crisis is gone, so we no longer need any of you*, nya~.”

——Five centimeters until the center of the circle.

Tsuchimikado gave Kamijou a grin. “But resolving an incident as a sorcerer in the limelight would be bad for a bunch of reasons. That’s why I have Red Style. Not Black Style, which is based on water, my specialty, nya. If someone asks who used sorcery, I could just tell them, *Stiyl fired it, since fire’s his specialty*.”

“…How bold of you. Will that really fool them?”

“Sure it will! Necessarius has 103,000 grimoires stored away, remember?

Wouldn't be strange at all if they'd studied non-Crossist sorcery, nya. Stiyl's runes don't actually have anything to do with Crossism, either. Well, I guess I'd have to temper my mana in kind of a Western way, too, instead of doing it the Eastern way."

"…"

"Don't look so shocked! Anyway, if we can pinpoint Oriana's location, we've won. If we can, I want to capture her myself and get her to tell us where Lidvia *and the other party for the deal* are. For now, though, stopping the Stab Sword deal takes priority, nya! We can blast the Stab Sword to outer space or tear apart Oriana's body to do it. Either way."

Zero centimeters until the center of the circle.

The four pieces of folded paper touched the card left by Oriana. There was a dry pop as the colored paper bounced away. Then, at an incredible speed, they started to draw a precise map on the ground. At first it was a blurry image like an unfocused camera, but it steadily came into focus.

Roads, buildings, trees on the streets, benches, vending machines, wind-power-generating propellers, and even an empty can—it was less a symbolic, simplified map than a super-high-resolution satellite image from space.

The location, once it finally came into focus, was…

Oriana Thomson suddenly perked up her head.

She craned her neck as she held the signboard-shaped object covered in a white cloth; the action caused her breasts to put more stress on the second button of her outfit—the only one buttoned.

White smoke fireworks were popping in the late September sky, and there was a cool, comfortable breeze despite the summer's lingering heat wave. The mottled white clouds lazily drifted in the same direction, giving the appearance of absolute peace and tranquility.

Nevertheless, Oriana felt a tingling nervousness on her skin…like the feeling right before charging into a building a bank robber was holed up in.

Oriana Thomson thought for a moment about what was coming. "CBTW,

CNABTWTTL, is it…? You're wide-open. ♪"

And then she grinned.

"Grah, gaaahhhhhhhhhhhh?!"

All of a sudden, Stiyl bent over like he'd just taken a body blow.

With a loud crack, the map lines being drawn on the ground all scattered in every direction. It was like someone had sneezed on a picture drawn with sand. Many more snaps and cracks of things breaking followed. For a moment, Kamijou thought it was Stiyl's bones.

"The sound of out-of-control mana warping space—a simple ghost sound! Kammy, give Stiyl a punch! That should stop it!!"

Kamijou was taken aback by his words. At the moment, he was scared, since he didn't know what was going on. He rushed to Stiyl and hastily hit the bent-over boy in the back. He was trying to do it fast, without thinking about measuring his strength.

There was a pop of air rushing.

Then, as though exhausted, Stiyl fell over onto the ground. Nevertheless, it seemed to have calmed the situation; he couldn't hear the weird noises anymore. Stiyl breathed heavily for a little while, but eventually he combed his sweat-soaked hair out of his face. "What…was that…? Some kind of defensive spell…in case she was traced…?"

Tsuchimikado walked over and picked up one of the unmoving pieces of origami. He set his fingers on it, folding it here and there. "If that were true, the something should have happened to *me* for setting up Four Ways to Truth's magic circle…but there's no trace of that." He waved the cleanly folded paper. "I think she read your mana, Stiyl. And she probably set up an interception spell that would activate when it detected your mana specifically. Damn. I thought she was suddenly counterattacking, but this was her aim all along. She let us use sorcery, read our mana, and then must have set up a magic circle to transmit it or something, nya!"

Kamijou winced at Tsuchimikado's words as he kept tinkering with the origami, then reached out a hand for Stiyl. Stiyl pushed his hand away, annoyed, and

stumbled up to his feet. “An interception spell to stop me after figuring out my mana patterns? Sounds like quite the problem.”

“…What’s that mean? She made a pinpoint attack on you, then, Stiyl?” Kamijou made a face like he didn’t understand half of what they were talking about.

Tsuchimikado sighed. “Yeah, mana does differ in quality and quantity depending on how the user tempers it…but I don’t think that alone would have given her the ability to pull off such a perfect interception, nya~,” he said, his hand diving into his shorts pocket, bringing out a red calligraphy pen…or something like it, anyway.

According to him, magic was like gasoline: It took the raw fuel, the person’s life force, and used the refinery of their style or religion to refine it.

But if, for example, the rune-using Stiyl used an Aztec method of tempering his mana, the mana he got out of it would be wholly different in nature. “Like making heavy oil or light oil instead of gasoline, nya~,” he said. People like Kaori Kanzaki, the saint of Amakusa, were experts in Buddhism and Shinto as well as Crossism, and could freely use whichever type of mana fit the situation.

If Oriana wanted to intercept Stiyl alone, she would have to know every type of mana he was likely to create. Tsuchimikado was of the opinion that she wouldn’t have thought herself safe for only sealing *one* of the mana patterns Stiyl refined in the service facility. Oriana wouldn’t have a grasp on the extent of Stiyl’s power, so she would have to consider possibilities that didn’t involve his true strength.

“Umm, then what is Oriana doing?”

“That’s the tricky part…I think it was something like this,” said Stiyl, still unsteady. “Mana itself has several different patterns. But *that’s not the case for its previous state*. The way a person refines mana differs based on their religion, the technique, and their life force. From there it’s just a mathematical problem. You can find the answer by following the numbers.”

For example, say there were twenty points’ worth of mana type A, and a mana refining method B. You compare them, then ask how many points of type B life force would be needed to refine twenty points of mana A with refining method B

—you could calculate the original life force used like that.

Irritated, Stiyl took a new cigarette out of a box and cast his stare at Tsuchimikado. He was busy writing some kind of symbol on the origami he held, using the red calligraphy pen. He then dropped it in front of him, telling Kamijou he was making a circle to get them out of the situation.

Stiyl looked back at Kamijou. “Mana doesn’t have traits that differ, but life force, of course, does. And that means Oriana *figured that out*. Damn it. I shouldn’t have placed those rune cards without thinking…Still, I would have understood if she used some large-scale holding facility for holding sorcerers, like the Tower of London or the basement of Windsor Castle. To think there was someone who could detect life force, analyze it, reverse-engineer it, apply it, and intercept it all by herself…I suppose I should have expected as much from the Route Disturber.”

He practically spat the words as he, in an unusual act, took out a match and struck it on the sole of his shoe. Maybe he was being careful not to use sorcery to create fire. Perhaps that was why he was waiting for Tsuchimikado to finish setting up, too, instead of counterattacking right away. The fact that a man with such immense self-pride was being *cautious* gave Kamijou an idea of the depth of Oriana’s skill.

Now that he thought about it, he was pretty sure the only one who clearly used sorcery in the earlier battle in the service facility had been Stiyl.

“If she had calculated the spell itself, instead, then Tsuchimikado would have taken damage, since he’s the one who drew the Four Ways to Truth circle on the ground. He didn’t, which means she had to have reacted to my life force.”

“You’re saying Oriana was analyzing your mana or life force or whatever on the run?” Kamijou looked at him askance, but Stiyl blew out smoke in irritation. Maybe he’d lost his usual calm because of the damage he’d taken, or maybe he just felt like it was a pain to explain something so basic for sorcerers.

“If she could do that, then…she’d be seen as even more valuable than your right hand.” He took in a full breath of smoke. “That interception spell of hers…it was a surgical-class spell on Tower of London levels. She would need a magic circle— No, she’d need command of an even larger facility. What that means is

that Oriana didn't use only a spell. She built an entire facility for it. Essentially what she probably did was get a super-fast computer and have it do the analysis for her. That way she'd be able to focus on getting away. Still…"

"Still what?" asked Kamijou.

Stiyl responded in a bitter voice. "…No, it's probably just my imagination. I feel like I've seen this automatic processing trick before…but that can't be. Oriana may be strong, but she can't possibly have one of *those*…" He was essentially talking to himself at that point.

Kamijou could only frown in confusion, but suddenly Tsuchimikado stopped writing on the origami next to him and grinned. "Nah, Stiyl. I'm thinkin' the same thing, actually."

"Are you serious?…Well, if she did have one of *those*, it would make sense that she could automatically operate a separate facility. But if that were the case, that would make her a wizard, not a sorcerer."

"Well, now. Maybe she really is, nya! From my point of view, there are some things about her that aren't stable. If she really is a complete wizard, she should have a sorcerer subordinate for her to lecture. I would guess that would be Lidvia's role, nya~."

As Tsuchimikado spoke, he marked up his origami even more with the calligraphy pen, writing symbols on top of his old ones.

"??? What exactly are you referring to?" The two sorcerers had been prattling on, leaving the amateur Kamijou completely in the dark.

Tsuchimikado looked at him and gave a little grin. "Right, right. I guess you've never really seen one, Kammy! You should know about them already, though. Has sorcery-related knowledge packed away inside, activates itself as a magic circle despite what the person wants? Stays active semipermanently by amplifying its strength just a tiny bit with what leaks from life force and ley lines?"

Tsuchimikado's smile deepened. His blue sunglasses lenses reflected a glare. "Still don't get it? Kammy, I don't think there's anybody closer to *them* than you, nya. After all, Index is with you, and she's got 103,000 kinds of *them*!"

103,000 kinds.

Index.

He didn't understand everything Tsuchimikado had just said, but he knew what he was referring to.

"Wait, c-could it…," he stammered.

"That's right, Kammy," Tsuchimikado said with levity, waving the origami in his hands.

"The original copies of a grimoire."

An original copy.

Grimoires had knowledge pertaining to sorcery recorded within. By itself that wasn't much, but it was said that if a normal human were to try and read it, it would destroy their mind. Plus, the grimoire's sentences, passages, and letters would activate themselves as a magic circle, creating a semipermanent interception system against those who would destroy the grimoire.

These original copies of the grimoires were indestructible, which was why they took the more temporary approach of sealing them instead. Index had 103,000 grimoires recorded in her mind, and Orsola Aquinas was trying to analyze the original copy of the *Book of the Law*—both, however, did so in order to oppose the danger presented by the grimoires.

Kamijou was basically an amateur when it came to sorcery. He'd never seen an actual grimoire. Despite that, weird stuff involving sorcery and grimoires always seemed to spring up near him, and people gave him nothing more than knowledge to combat it.

Tsuchimikado heaved a sigh and drew a symbol on the four pieces of origami. "It's because, fundamentally speaking, magic circles and grimoires have similar characteristics, nya. I mean, the primary side effect of original grimoire copies is a magic circle, after all."

Kamijou frowned. He had no idea what Tsuchimikado was getting at. And there was a problem even before that. "How are they the same? Grimoires are some old books, and magic is like star charts you draw in circles like in RPGs, right?"

His question earned an irritated glare from Stiyl. "…Again with the absurd analogies. They're Seals of David. *And it's not a single item—it's an intermediate magic circle used as part of the larger circle.*" He cast a gaze toward Tsuchimikado's hands. "Suppose I'll start with explaining the circles first…The initial state of a magic circle is just that of a simple circle. Like this." As he spoke, he picked up a rock on the ground and squatted, before drawing a fifty-centimeter-wide circle. Despite it being freehand, the circle was scarily perfect. It surprised him, but Tsuchimikado didn't even look over from his pen-writings. Maybe it was important for sorcerers to be dexterous so they could make circles and talismans and stuff on their own.

"Even amateurs like you think of pentagrams and hexagrams for this. They're used for additional effects. To amplify the effects of the base circle, you overlay Seals of Solomon or David on it."

Stiyl breathed out some smoke and continued to draw a pentagram inside the circle. This, too, was a perfectly equilateral five-pointed star, which separated the circle exactly. The lines were completely straight.

But what does this have to do with magic circles? Kamijou wondered.

When Stiyl saw his confusion, he clicked his tongue to himself. His irritation was at not only Kamijou and the physical damage Stiyl had taken, but also at Tsuchimikado's taking so long to set up for this plan he was considering (apparently considering, anyway). "Then we come to the later stage of the magic circle." Stiyl paused. "I don't want to have to explain this again, so watch closely." He moved the small rock some more. "In the late stage of a magic circle, you add other things on the top. These are the characters. In most cases, you would write the name of the angel you wanted to borrow power from around the edge of the circle, but…"

As he spoke, he started to write something along the circle. It was a dreadful magic circle, so he had thought Stiyl would write some unknown letters there, but instead, he just wrote in English.

Scritch, scratch. Stiyl's stone etched into the asphalt. "You write the name of the angel to borrow power from first, like this. Well, this is like indicating what kind of power you want, like fire or wind. You specify what type of telesma—

angelic power—and how much of it you need. The type goes without saying, but the amount is actually very important. If it's too little, the spell obviously won't work, and if you have too much, the extra will do whatever it wants. It's quite difficult to figure out the appropriate amount."

It didn't take long before the English letters made a complete revolution around the circle. Stiyl kept going, though, continuing the line of text on another line outside the first.

"Once you acquire the necessary amount of telesma with the right type from a different plane, you write down how you want to use it. You can put it into a staff to imbue it with a special effect, or use it for defensive powers around the magic circle. Things like that. When you do…"

From the second line to a third and then a fourth, he continued his passages, the characters curling around each other like a Swiss roll.

They might have been for a magic circle with symbols on it, but…

"…it looks like a page from a book, doesn't it?"

Stiyl puffed some smoke onto the circle on the ground.

It actually looked exactly like that. The way he wrote the characters had been irregular itself. There was no rule, none of the normal horizontal or vertical text you would find in a regular book. However, the lines of characters around the circle—what if you were to place them horizontally? If it was saying what type of power and how much you needed, how to construct the magic circle, and what effects it would have…then wasn't that basically just a *recipe for a spell?*

A spell recipe.

What else was a grimoire but that?

"Of course, there's a flaw to using magic circles like this. The more complicated the diagram gets, the more difficult it becomes to control the circle. For example, the English word *front* can refer to the front of something, but in certain circumstances it can mean 'promenade.' If there's any misinterpretation between what the caster is thinking and what's written on the magic circle, the spell can easily go out of control and hurt the user." He paused for a moment. "Though mistaking the meaning of a word you wrote on the magic circle is a

pretty dull-witted thing for a caster to do.”

Stiyl slowly stood up. He tossed away the stone he was using. Tsuchimikado saw that and spoke. “When all’s said and done, the amount of information in a magic circle is directly linked to its power. The extra characters you write into complicated patterns are no more than a little trick to help out. Same goes for the origami I used for the Four Ways to Truth spell. They’re like accessories providing information through the four colors in each direction. And if this is the case, how much information do you think grimoires must have, considering they’re entire books of the stuff?——You could basically say the original copies of grimoires are super-compressed magic circles. So dense that pro sorcerers wouldn’t know what to do with ’em, nya~.”

Tsuchimikado came to the conclusion. He had used the red calligraphy pen to write symbols all over the origami in his hands, to the point where they were totally covered.

Kamijou fell silent for a moment. Then he decided to ask the question he was thinking. “So…what? You’re saying Oriana got her hands on the original copy of a grimoire just so she could make an automatic interception spell for the Daihasei Festival?”

That was a scary thought. Kamijou himself had gotten wrapped up in the battle over a grimoire called the *Book of the Law*, caught in the middle of three separate sorcery factions. Of course, grimoires probably differed in value and rank, too, but this just didn’t make sense to him. It wasn’t just that they were a big deal—it was like they were *too* big a deal and Oriana was wasting the one she had.

Still, Stiyl didn’t agree with his opinion. “…Can she actually do such a thing? The alchemist Aureolus Isard is known for being a grimoire author, and he was seen as the fastest writer among the Cancellarii—but even with no rest or sleep, he’d take three days to pen one grimoire at the least. A thicker grimoire would have taken a month for him. I really don’t think she could have put together an original grimoire while on the run. And we don’t know if she actually has one in the first place…”

“You’ve got it wrong. Creating the book from start to finish would take at least

that much time, nya. That, though, isn't what Oriana's after." Tsuchimikado spoke in a lighthearted tone. "For her, the effects of the grimoire converted into the magic circle are what's important. She doesn't care about the format of the book. It's more like a quick memo, one she didn't care if others could read, isn't it, nya?" he finished, completely reddened origami in one hand.

"…A Shorthand one, then? I still don't think she could do that, but…it doesn't matter. We need to consider every possibility right now."

Kamijou looked down and mulled over what the sorcerers were saying. Eventually he brought his head back up. "Nobody can destroy the original copies, right? If people could just jot them down on the fly for every fight, wouldn't the world be full of grimoires?"

"You're on the right track, nya. Necessarius hasn't received any report to that effect, either. This is just speculation, but Oriana's Shorthand probably isn't perfect. Real grimoires will convert their pages into a magic circle and stay semipermanently active. But I'd think her chicken scratch would break down on its own pretty quickly," he answered smoothly. He continued writing with his pen on top of the already filled origami. The appearance wasn't everything, he said with a dry grin. It mattered a lot what order you wrote the seals in and how you overlapped them. "Lots of sorcerers have tried penning faulty grimoires in the past and died when they went berserk, nya. Maybe Oriana is keeping her Shorthand grimoires able to be destroyed at will. That *would* make it easier for a caster to use. A mixed technique, blending grimoire and sorcerer…Not one to save knowledge or skills for future generations, but one she could use immediately and discard a moment later. Something like that, nya?"

"Hmm." Kamijou folded his arms. "I still don't really get all this original-grimoire-and-magic-circle stuff, though."

"…Really, why bother explaining *anything* to you?" said Stiyl, frowning, his face still pale from his injury.

"Now that she intercepted you, does that mean you can't use any magic on her?"

"No. I don't think I can use *any* magic until we do something about the interception spell. I'm pretty sure her spell will detect when I try to use anything

and will intercept it. It doesn't care why I'm trying to cast it, and there wouldn't be any point in adding such bothersome commands."

Stiyl had just confessed a weakness, but his tone of voice was bitter. It showed no weak emotion. He was showing that things weren't over yet.

"So what should we do? Stiyl can't use magic anymore, so that, er…Four Ways to Truth? We can't use that to locate Oriana anymore, right? And Tsuchimikado can't use sorcery in the first place."

"Not quite," said Tsuchimikado, shaking his head. The origami in his hand were soaked in red ink, wet to the point where it seemed strange they didn't just tear apart. "This is an automatic interception spell using Shorthand, remember? We just have to hold that in check. We could make an amulet as a countermeasure if things go well, but she still has that original copy, imperfect though it may be. It might just be easier to smash this spell and let Stiyl use sorcery again, nya~."

Kamijou glanced down at his right hand. Original grimoires supposedly couldn't be destroyed by any means, but the Imagine Breaker might be able to manage.

Stiyl breathed out smoke. "We can break her Shorthand grimoire, but is it possible Oriana flees outside Four Ways to Truth's search area?"

"Yeah. But if she was confident enough to flee so quickly, she wouldn't have put together an interception spell, would she, nya? That sorta thing takes time to make. She's already pressed for time, so she shouldn't normally want to make more work for herself."

"Hmm." Stiyl folded his arms.

Kamijou frowned. For a basic objective, that was enough, but… "So where is this Shorthand thing exactly?"

"I believe it would be hidden somewhere."

"Oriana can't take it with her?"

"We don't know the subtle conditions for using Shorthand, so we can't really say, nya. But here's how she's doing things. She sets up stationary traps in this service facility to figure out Stiyl's life-force pattern. Then she sets up an

automatic circle to grab that life force and send it to her. I think it's possible the last in her little chain of spells would be in the same vein—a stationary spell—don't you, nya?"

"Then you know where she set up the Shorthand grimoire?" Without knowing what route she'd chosen to flee, they couldn't decide where the interception grimoire was set up either, of course.

"That's what we're gonna find out, nya~."

"How?" asked Kamijou, but he got no response.

Tsuchimikado, for just a moment and very quietly, exhaled and inhaled. He returned to his pocket the red calligraphy pen he'd been using, then held the soaked, dyed origami delicately in both hands.

Then he spoke.

"Stiyl, I don't care what kind—use a spell. I want to know where the interference is coming from."

They were cold words.

Kamijou was shocked, and Stiyl's face became completely impassive.

"Oriana used a Shorthand grimoire to interfere with our movements after figuring out Stiyl's life force. Even that interception spell should be using mana. I'll set up a Divination Circle around you—it'll react to that mana like a litmus test. It'll be an unused magic circle, one none of our mana is going through yet. The Divination Circle will activate in response to the interception spell's mana, then calculate the direction and distance the mana is coming from."

As he spoke, he took his red-dyed origami and squatted. Then, he moved the origami on the floor as though he were wiping a table. In a matter of seconds, a vermilion circle two meters wide had been drawn. After finishing his work, he stood up, not seeming pleased at all.

Kamijou found himself doubting Tsuchimikado's sanity—how could he say that so calmly, like he was reading out of an instruction manual? He hastily grabbed his shoulders.

"He can't do that, Tsuchimikado! Do you have a concrete idea of what will

happen once the interception hits him?! If we do this one more time, Stiyl will end up collapsing again!!”

“One more time?” Tsuchimikado frowned, confused. “Who said that? *Once obviously isn’t gonna be enough for this.* Stiyl won’t be dropping out of the running here. At worst, after we destroy the interception spell, I’ll need him to use Four Ways to Truth again to find Oriana. And if the first Divination Circle doesn’t detect the interception spell, *we’ll need him to keep on trying*.”

Kamijou’s expression darkened. “…You…Are you serious right now?”

Tsuchimikado looked him dead in the eye. “Kammy, you seem to be forgetting something important. Even if Oriana isn’t here, even if we’re not crossing blades or firing bullets at each other, we’re still in the middle of a battle with our lives on the line. Whole nations, even the world, could be affected by its outcome.”

“But…” Kamijou stomped on the ground. “I could understand being absolutely sure we’ll win in exchange for Stiyl getting hurt again. Why can’t you guarantee that?! You’re saying it’s possible nothing could happen no matter how many times he gets hurt! Plus, even if we did find and wreck the interception spell, you’re gonna drag him with us to fight even more? That’s bullshit!! And I’m not gonna stand for it!!”

At the end, he barely managed to hold in the last words he was going to say.

…You’re getting Stiyl to use magic so that you don’t have to fight while hurt…

“I know. Let’s get started,” answered Stiyl, accepting the clearly unfair proposition.

“But you…!!”

“Would you *please* not act so friendly with me, Touma Kamijou? It’s creeping me out. If this is what it takes to end things, then I have no problem with it.” He gave Tsuchimikado a glare. “In exchange, you’d better find exactly where that interception spell is. And we’re settling this problem ourselves. We will *not* let it continue to spiral out of control. Do you understand me?”

Tsuchimikado didn’t avert his eyes under the glare. “Yeah, got it. We won’t let this get any more out of hand—Index could be forced to return if that happened. *We’ll be sure to defend her life in Academy City.* That was your condition, wasn’t

it?”

Kamijou was at a loss for words. In the end, Stiyl was only thinking of how to make a certain girl happy, even if it meant getting hurt. Even if he didn’t exist in that happy world. Even if Touma Kamijou was now standing where he should have been. It would take more than those facts to stop him.

The sorcerer Stiyl Magnus turned his back to the two of them and removed a rune card from his inside pocket.

The Divination Circle.

Stiyl didn’t hesitate to step into the vermilion ring Motoharu Tsuchimikado had drawn on the ground.

“Touma Kamijou…I’m not pleased by the fact that you’re here,” said the red-haired priest in an unwavering voice. “Why are you not at her side? If anything were to befall her, it would be *your fault*.”

Then, runic flames erupted—and at that moment, the interception spell activated.

A scream rang out, followed by the sound of someone collapsing.

That was how Stiyl Magnus lived his own life.

CHAPTER 3

Tactics of the Hunter and the Hunted
Worst_Counter.

1

Seiri Fukiyose was a member of the Daihasei Festival administrative committee.

She had no special privileges like officers of Anti-Skill or Judgment, but being in charge of event setup and judging was still a position demanding respect. To the world this was just a big sports festival, but it was also an easy way to rate the ability development progression of the schools. The results would even affect school budgets.

Of course, the committee members participated in the events themselves. Therefore, they had to attend to their work as committee members as it was convenient for their schedules. Easy to say, but Academy City took up a third of the Tokyo metropolitan area. The next stadium could be pretty far away. You couldn't be on this committee without the flexibility to improvise for the slight changes in start and end times for events—and a penchant for planning out the puzzle presented by scheduling. Everything was a race against time.

To get to the ball-toss stadium, the automatic buses would be faster than the subway…No, that won't work. That main road is used for long-distance races and would be off-limits right now. Which leaves the subway…but since it's in the same district, it would be faster to run!

Fukiyose thought it over, carrying a box packed with sports drinks. It was common sense for a committee member to have the map and schedules memorized. Otherwise, they wouldn't be able to deal with unforeseen situations not in the pamphlet.

She was heading for a different stadium to do some judging, but she had gone

off the shortest path and was taking the long way around. The reason was simple—avoiding areas with crowds of people would ultimately get her there faster.

And now, for various reasons, she was retracing her steps back down the route she'd dragged Touma Kamijou, and she was making rapid progress.

There is a bit of distance between the subway station and the stadium, and I need to avoid crowded areas. Which means running through smaller roads without many people will get me there sooner in the end…It's a little scary running without having warmed up first, though!

Fukiyose muttered to herself as she went. Suddenly, though, she frowned and stopped.

In front of her.

Just a few meters away, a silver-haired girl in a cheerleading outfit was crawling on the ground. *The asphalt under the sun must be hot to the touch*, she thought. The botanical laboratory was right there. She should have just cooled herself off in the shade.

The girl groaned. "…I finally got changed and wanted to show Touma, but he didn't wait for me…He ran off by himself…"

"Umm, Sister? Don't be so down! I'm sure Kami had a very good reason for this."

Comforting the exhausted cheerleader out of pity was an even smaller girl, but this one was actually Fukiyose's homeroom teacher, Komoe Tsukuyomi. Like the foreign girl, she was in a brightly colored cheerleading outfit.

Fukiyose kept frowning. "What happened to the matter I discussed with you, Miss Komoe? And what are you doing like that out in public? If you're having minor hallucinations, then you should calm yourself by ingesting warm milk or another hot drink. Or you might use a stimulant such as red pepper to get yourself thinking straight again. I have only red pepper right now. Do you want it? Here!"

"N-no, I'm just fine, Fuki— No, really, I'm all right! So please don't push that red pepper under the sister's nose! That looks a lot like a weird punishment they used to use on girls during the Edo period!!"

“I see,” said Fukiyose, returning to her pocket the seven-spice pepper mixture in the small gourd.

Miss Komoe was pale and acting very flustered, but the crawling cheerleader was so depressed she didn’t even notice what either of them was doing. She had her butt in the air a little, so Fukiyose could almost see under her skirt, but not quite.

She spoke. “Wh-where’s Touma? Where did he go…?”

“Who knows?” said Fukiyose, tilting her head.

Just where *had* that boy gone? What was he doing?

2

Stiyl Magnus’s body lay unmoving on the ground.

A soft autumn breeze blew through the service facility, but his black clothing was all that rustled. He seemed like he was breathing, but he was clearly in a bad state.

As for Motoharu Tsuchimikado…

“Hmm…Oh, there we go. The Divination Circle found somethin’ out. If I just fiddle with this here…She’s to the northwest?”

He wasn’t paying attention to his fallen colleague. Without a care for Stiyl, he lowered his eyes to the two-meter crimson magic circle around the priest.

“Distance to the Shorthand response…Given the strong point of this color, I’d say three hundred and two meters. Shit. She actually put it close by. It’s not moving, either, so it must be something stationary like we thought, nya. Maybe it means Oriana hasn’t gotten far, either. Maybe she’s going for the stealthy approach, walking along with the crowds instead of running heedlessly. Hey, Kammy, you got a map on ya? I want to know what buildings are three hundred and two meters to the northwest of here.”

“Tsuchi…mikado…” Kamijou stood there, still dazed, trembling. Tsuchimikado wasn’t paying attention to that, either.

He noticed Kamijou wasn’t answering and asked again, still not looking at him.

“Kammy, a map! Or the Daihasei Festival pamphlet. Wait, didn’t your phone have a GPS map on it? Give it here and I’ll do it.”

“Tsuchimikadooooooooooo!!”

The next thing Kamijou knew, he was grabbing Tsuchimikado’s T-shirt collar. His teeth ground in anger, his hands strong enough to tear the gold chain from his neck. In his rage he thought about destroying the magic circle with his right hand. But in the end he couldn’t—Stiyl was still there, collapsed and unattended to.

Tsuchimikado calmly looked Kamijou in the eye. “Kammy, Kammy. Don’t worry about Stiyl. He’s a professional sorcerer, remember? He has some resistance to magical attacks. Besides, Oriana’s spell was only trying to interfere, not attack,” he said, brushing off Kamijou’s anger. “If you look at it broadly, it was basically just to get Stiyl to fail to temper any mana. Mana’s made from life force. If he keeps failing, it’ll be like burning out an engine—it’ll do bad things to his body. And that’s all it is, Kammy. I gave him a quick look and it’s basically like he just has sunstroke. Nothing to get so excited about.”

“Don’t look down on me, you bastard! Don’t you understand who he just got himself hurt for?! How can you be so cold?!”

Kamijou gripped Tsuchimikado’s shirt tighter and pulled him closer when…

Drip.

One of Tsuchimikado’s temples had torn slightly.

A moment later, as if triggered by the red bead of blood sliding down Tsuchimikado, the side of his gym uniform began to take on a red hue. Kamijou watched the crimson spread to the point where it was like he’d been stabbed.

“Tsu…chimikado…?” He hurriedly took away his hands.

Tsuchimikado kept a straight face. “The Divination Circle reacts to incoming spells’ mana, then tells you the distance and direction. It’s convenient—*too convenient to activate without using mana, Kammy*…”

Kamijou gulped. He was right—if they could have used a magic circle to cast a spell without mana, then even Index could do it. In fact, magic circles would be

the perfect solution for her, since she couldn't use mana. But, of course, he had never seen her either using anything like that or explaining this Divination Circle like it was her specialty.

Tsuchimikado's breathing grew the faintest bit ragged. "Compared to the… search spell I made Stiyl use…I barely used any mana…and now I'm a wreck." He put one hand to his blood-soaked side. "Listen, Kammy. You're right—Stiyl is down and it's all my fault. If I could use sorcery better than I can, this wouldn't have happened. I admit it. You can hate me as much as you want."

Then, desperately holding up his wavering body on wobbling legs, he declared, "But I will make this succeed. I will find Oriana's interception spell…and destroy it. And then I'll capture Oriana and stop…the deal for the Stab Sword…myself. And then…we'll be even. As for the interest…I'll give it back to Stiyl…once this is over."

Of *course* it bothered him.

That's exactly why Tsuchimikado decided to maintain his cool attitude—because he knew that it bothered him a lot. It was to repay his fallen colleague's efforts. More than that, it was to lighten the burden on Stiyl by bringing this as close to an ending as he could.

Kamijou didn't know what to say, and Tsuchimikado smiled thinly—as if to tell him that he didn't need to mend his ways, since it wouldn't change the fact that Stiyl had gotten hurt. "Kammy, a map. I want to know what's three hundred and two meters northwest of here. That's where the Shorthand interception spell Oriana set up should be."

"Uh, right…" The Daihasei Festival pamphlet was too thick for him to fit in his gym shorts pocket. He took out his phone and booted up the map feature, looking for the place Tsuchimikado had said.

And…

…then he doubted his own eyes.

"Wha…Tsuchimikado, northwest, right? Three hundred and two meters exactly, right?!"

"To be precise, with north as zero degrees, it's at three hundred and eighteen

degrees clockwise. Definitely northwest, nya. The distance is a little vague, but shouldn't be too far off."

"…Fuck."

Kamijou showed Tsuchimikado the cell phone screen with the specified place on it.

He paled.

Kamijou couldn't blame him.

It was dead center in a yard of a certain middle school. An airship floated slowly through the autumn sky, about to broadcast the next event. And it was going to happen right there within the next ten minutes.

3

Kamijou and Tsuchimikado couldn't do anything about the fallen Stiyl—partly because they wanted to keep the commotion to a minimum. Tsuchimikado drew the magic circle and folded the origami for Four Ways to Truth by Stiyl again, in order to look for Oriana. He'd told Stiyl that he'd contact him via cell phone as soon as he destroyed the interception spell, and to use that as the signal to activate Four Ways to Truth.

Stiyl, still lying on the ground, managed a nod. It was enough to let Kamijou know he was alive, and he felt relieved.

Tsuchimikado took bandages out of his gym shorts pocket—maybe he'd calculated that he'd get hurt—and began to stop the bleeding in his side. There was no hiding the bloodstains sticking on his uniform, though. He'd cause issues if he went out like this.

After telling Kamijou he'd do something about his clothes, he said to go on ahead. There was no point in both of them standing around doing nothing, so they decided that Kamijou should run over to the middle school in question alone.

So, with that, Kamijou was currently dashing full speed down the road this fine autumn day. Children being led by older people and men and women holding pamphlets looked his way, but they couldn't give him any more than a passing

glance. He ducked under a slowly turning wind-power propeller and accelerated, his cell phone in his hand. He was talking to Tsuchimikado.

“Oriana had no trouble blocking Stiyl’s sorcery, and given how she’s fleeing from just the three of us, she must have known our issues to some extent, nya. Setting up the interception spell in a sports field in broad daylight? She’s just doing it out of spite now!”

“I get that she went in there before the event, but how did she set up the thing in the *middle* of the campus? Does she have some kinda magic that turns her invisible?”

“If she could, I think she would’ve used it to get away from us, nya. Anyway, Kammy, how much longer until the event starts?”

Kamijou gave the big screens on the wall of a department store a glance as he ran down the straight road. “Seven minutes. It says so on the electric scoreboards all over the place.”

“That means they’re done setting up. The audience and cameras are there. I don’t think we could sneak in there at this point and do something about her Shorthand grimoire.”

Depending on the event, one program would take somewhere around thirty minutes to finish up; some were longer and took about an hour. If Four Ways to Truth had a search range of about three kilometers, then if they waited until it was over, Oriana could easily get outside the range even if she walked slowly. “Then what do we do? We can’t just leave the spell in the middle of the schoolyard.”

“Of course not. Kammy, what are they playing there?”

“Huh? I think…” Kamijou searched for another electronic scoreboard as he shot around a corner. A slowly moving drum-shaped security robot on the road was relaying information through its speakers about the nearby stadium. He listened for a moment. “Looks like ball toss. It’s a big event—whole middle schools going against each other.”

“Okay, okay. I just saw the broadcast info on an airship. I don’t know how she set up the Shorthand grimoire, but it’s definitely there. Only one thing to do,

then, Kammy…pretend to be athletes and sneak in.”

Kamijou’s legs got tangled up, and he almost fell spectacularly. “Are you serious?!”

“It’s all we can do, nya. We have to get in there before it starts without causing suspicion. It’ll be fine! If there’re more than one middle school competing, there should be hundreds of people there. They can get by with one or two substitutes.”

“We’re in high school! I don’t know if pretending to be in middle school is gonna work! Do you have a plan for that?!”

“Kammy…it’s all about youth. As long as we can retake our bubbling sense of youthfulness, they’ll never suspect us.”

This is all kinds of messed up! Kamijou nearly lost heart. There would be TV cameras filming the event. If they screwed up, they’d bring shame to their own class.

Then Tsuchimikado brought his voice down a level. “No, Kammy. We can’t falter here. Not while searching for Oriana, of course—but there’re other things that could be dangerous.”

“What?” Kamijou listened more closely as he ran.

“That interception spell might not be aimed only at Stiyl. In the right circumstances, it could lash out against other people, too, nya. Regular people, aside from us.”

“…What are you saying?”

People surrounded Kamijou now because he was close to the field. Official events closed their reception desks ten minutes before starting, but this was still an athletic meet. Nevertheless, there seemed to be more security officers to make up for the naïveté of the entrance conditions.

“Listen calmly, Kammy. Oriana’s interception spell detects the preparatory stages of sorcery, then identifies the user’s life force. Understand that much?”

“Y-yeah.” He didn’t actually understand that well. He knew, though, that Oriana’s Shorthand had somehow picked out Stiyl and blocked him from using

magic. “What about it?”

“Well, nya…This is the problem. Preparatory stages of sorcery. What do you think that applies to?”

“…What? Well, I mean…Like if you start chanting a weird magic formula or drawing a strange magic circle?” Kamijou didn’t have an understanding of what sorcery *actually was*, so he couldn’t give a good answer.

Tsuchimikado’s voice grew sour. “But if that’s all, then…Hey, Kammy. There’s a spell called Kotodama—it means the spirit of language. It uses the influential power of the meaning of words. To prepare for it, all you have to do is speak.”

Kamijou was stunned. He didn’t stop, though—the middle school in question was before his eyes.

“This is only a possibility, but if it reacted to that, it would be a major pain. Just having a conversation near her Shorthand grimoire would give the interception spell an order to add targets. And it would crush them the same way it did Stiyl.” He paused. “Do you think it would care if it was a sorcerer talking or just a normal person? Even the regular students and audience members are in a lot of danger.”

“Wait, is that even possible? When Stiyl went down, we were talking normally, weren’t we?” Kamijou overtook the spectators heading to the stadium and shot for the middle school’s entrance. There was an entrance fee to get into Academy City, so you didn’t need a pass to get into the stadium.

“Maybe, nya. There are rules to how Kotodama is set up and limitations on what words can be used. Sort of like how haiku has specific syllabic structures. So it might not react just from saying something, but…Do you know what the simplest magic ritual in the world is?”

“Huh???” There was a line of people waiting at the stadium entrance—the middle school gate—to get in. He knew he’d have to break through it quickly, but…

“Touching. Especially touching with hands—it has strong meaning, nya. The reason a lot of religions place different values on right and left comes from the distribution of roles between the right and left hands. In the New Testament of

the Bible, the main character—the Son of God—is said to have saved people from sickness and death by touching them with His right hand. What if Oriana's Shorthand grimoire reacted to that?"

"Wa…Wait." Kamijou stopped moving in spite of himself.

Tsuchimikado continued. "Perhaps a full-blown sorcerer could touch it and it wouldn't matter. The act of touching isn't just a Crossist thing—it's a magical operation used by all kinds of religions and sects. I think using only that as the condition to analyze a person's life force would make it too vague, too, nya. If a professional sorcerer had set up some defenses, they could probably reject Shorthand's magical incursion…However!" He paused there. "Against a totally defenseless amateur, even if the conditions are somewhat vague, it could still forcibly analyze the person's life force and invade them. On top of that, since they wouldn't have any defensive power at all that a sorcerer would have, they'd suffer the effects a lot worse than Stiyl did. Sunstroke and heatstroke can kill people—you could relate the danger to that."

"B-but the thing that attacked Stiyl was doing it to block his sorcery, wasn't it? Would it even react to a normal person or an esper?"

"Strictly speaking, it reacts to the *life force* of a person *preparing magic*, so even normal people would be in danger. It probably doesn't matter if they can temper mana or not, or if they know anything about sorcery, nya. Even the Four Ways to Truth searching circle Stiyl used was just a secondhand thing I drew, right?"

This is the worst, thought Kamijou. The front gate was right before him. He stared at the campus grounds. It was like there was a land mine buried somewhere in there. It was possible nobody would actually step on it, but it was there, and a lot of people were about to start their event without knowing. And it wasn't on a defined course, like a relay race or hundred-meter sprint, but a ball-toss game using the entirety of the schoolyard. It was highly probable someone would draw the losing ticket.

"Anyway, Kammy, we need to deal with the interception spell before we have casualties. We don't want sorcery popping up on TV cameras—and more importantly, we don't want normal people getting hurt."

Tsuchimikado hung up.

Kamijou shoved the phone back into his pocket and backed away from the main gate. If he got in line now, he'd never make it in time. Instead, he ran along the metal fence demarcating the school grounds. It was about two meters high, but if he tried to climb over, the unmanned recon helicopters overhead would see him. If he caused too much of a fuss, combat helicopters could fly in from somewhere else, too. He ran around to the back of the campus and found a back gate.

Of course, there was a security detail assigned there. If he had a gym uniform and ID for this middle school, he'd be golden. With his current clothing, though, he'd be stopped, even if he *was* a resident of the city.

What should I do, then…? Kamijou walked over to a juice vending machine and thought. About five minutes until the event started. There was no time to look for another exit…

Then something moved near the back gate. A female student, carrying a cooler with sports drinks in it, went into the grounds from the front gate. She had short sleeves, shorts, and a thin parka over her gym uniform. Her rear end came in and out of view under the parka's hemline.

It was an administrative committee member—Seiri Fukiyose.

"No way!" He quickly hid behind the vending machine.

"…?" Fukiyose, with the cooler in her hands, stopped abruptly at the back gate, then turned around. But then she gave a confused look and disappeared into the schoolyard.

*I don't think she saw me…*If she had, she would have gotten really mad and said something like, "Why are you hanging around here doing nothing instead of cheering us on, Touma Kamijou? If your brain hasn't developed fully, then you need DHA! Tuna eyeballs, three meals a day!"

Still…"Th-that's not good…Tsuchimikado told me to slip into the event, but if she starts her committee member judging or whatever, she'll find us out instantly…Damn it! I knew we weren't gonna be able to get in there on the ground!"

"…What's all this, nya?"

Kamijou jumped in surprise at the sudden whisper from behind. *He caught up already?!* he thought, turning around to see Tsuchimikado in a brand-new uniform. His treatment for his wound seemed perfect; a passing glance wouldn't betray the fact that he was hurt. "D-did you decide to get in from the back, too?"

"Well, yeah. Seems way easier to waltz on in this way," he said lightly.

Kamijou looked at the back gate again. Three Anti-Skill officers in full gear, plus an unmanned helicopter overhead. Could they really slip inside with all that?

Tsuchimikado looked at his dubious, thoughtful face and grinned happily. "No, seriously, it's real easy! See, look at that puddle. It's not raining here, so it's probably from the management's sprinklers."

"Right. What do you mean?"

"I mean this. ♪" He suddenly swept Kamijou's legs out from under him. Kamijou cried out and slammed into the puddle. Tsuchimikado shouted, "Wah-ha-ha-ha! Never thought we'd be playing in puddles at our age, nyaa!!" Then he greeted Kamijou with a flying body press.

Kra-shhh came a sound effect he'd never even heard in comedies as he sank farther in. The Anti-Skill officers at the gate looked at them suspiciously.

He gurgled. "Agh…! Wh-what the hell, man…?!"

As Kamijou writhed underneath Tsuchimikado, the man with the sunglasses said in a very low voice, "…Kammy, you've got mud all over your uniform, right? Now we can't tell what school the design is from."

Before he could manage a "huh?" the mud-covered Tsuchimikado rose. He offered a hand—well, more like pulled him up by force—then went over to the male Anti-Skill officer who had cautiously approached.

"Ack, sorry! We're supposed to be in this event! What should we do? We can't go in looking like this, can we?! There're cameras out there!"

The sudden plea seemed to take the officer by surprise. He gave them a once-over, but the subtle characteristics that would have identified what school they

were from had been covered by mud.

“Wh-what? O-oh, I see. Quite the problem. I don’t suppose you’ve brought a change of clothes?”

“Well, actually, we did! But they’re in the clubroom.”

“Th-then get a move on. There’re less than four minutes left. Oh, sorry—let me see your IDs. Rules are rules. I promise it’ll only take a moment.”

Kamijou couldn’t help but wince. The officer brought out a long, narrow tube the size of a pen. He pressed a button on its tip, causing a see-through piece to unravel and flatten out into a board. It was about fifteen centimeters tall and wide. It was a simple Academy City ID–matching device that would be pressed onto your palm to read your fingerprints, pulse, and bioelectric signal patterns.

…H-hey, Tsuchimikado! How are we supposed to get around this…?! Kamijou nearly said it out loud in his nervousness, but Tsuchimikado stuck his mud-covered palm into it.

“Right here, right?” he said. “What?! It’s got some kind of error!”

“What?! Y-you need to wash your hands before using one of these!” The officer frantically messed with the matching numbers, but there was nothing he could do about the parts that ended up sucking in mud. He thought hard and looked to one of his colleagues nearby, but the other shook her head. He must have been the only one with one of these devices. “Damn, I’ll go get a replacement one from around front…”

“There’s no time! We need to go to the clubroom, change, and then get to the starting gate!”

Tsuchimikado’s panicked voice caused the officer to look over at his two partners. One of them was gesturing them over, and the other was waving his hands in front of his face, indicating to just let them through. After a moment’s thought, the officer nodded a little and seemed to accept the democratic decision to let them in. “Then get moving! They won’t let you in midway through the event!”

“Thank you so much!!” Tsuchimikado grabbed Kamijou’s hand and pulled him straight through the back gate. Kamijou was fed up with all this, but he hadn’t

forgotten what they were here for.

“Hey, Tsuchimikado! Where do you think the spare uniforms are?! We can’t just blend in when we’re covered in mud like this, can we?!”

“What? They’re always in the nurse’s office, Kammy! And it should be open so that they can take injured people, nya! Let’s get it over with and sneak ourselves in!!”

The two of them ran along the edge of the campus as they talked, heading toward the concrete school building.

Less than three minutes until the event started.

4

The next event was the ball toss.

Mikoto Misaka stood in the schoolyard, which was made of solid ground.

She was used to the latest and greatest conveniences of Tokiwadai Middle School, but the dirt field, with its irregular surface and its wide-ranging impact-softening effects depending on where you stood, felt nice and fresh to her. A breeze came, blowing some dirt into the air, making it look like a Wild West film. She wondered if the place would even allow for precise ability measurement. Perhaps it was a training facility for real combat that took irregular terrain into account.

Tokiwadai Middle School numbered a little less than two hundred students, which wasn’t many. On top of that, they were all tried-and-true proper young ladies. An observer would have seen them as more than just slender and delicate —they looked touchingly cute. There were a lot of cameras in the audience, too. Audience members were probably looking less at the students’ true abilities than at the girls themselves.

However, that was an opinion held by those *outside* Academy City. Those on the *inside* thought the direct opposite.

Fighting the young ladies of Tokiwadai Middle School meant they’d be fighting against only Level Three through Level Five espers. You could go for superior numbers and better physiques, but you could never be very optimistic against

this army of ladies powerful enough to sink an Aegis ship with a smile.

In truth, the middle school they were facing, which was surrounding several basket-topped poles for the other team, numbered more than *two thousand* students. Even so, she could tell at a glance that there was an odd atmosphere about them, a tragic yet brave resolution. The general consensus among the Tokiwadai School players was that they looked like they were playing to lose. The haughtier of their bunch immediately sniffed that out and began their high-pitched *oh-ho-ho-ho* laughs.

Mikoto Misaka, however, disliked it.

Disliked it so much that her hands went to her hips and crackling blue sparks were flying from her bangs—and from the rest of her, too.

…What is going on here?

The opposing team was just one hundred meters away. Amid the two-thousand-plus middle school students was one she didn't think was supposed to be there. He even looked the part—where had he gotten that gym uniform?

It was a person she had never beaten.

It was the one boy in the crowd who looked like he was about to cry.

What…are…you…doing…here…?!

A few younger girls nearby hesitantly called out to her, but Mikoto didn't notice the dark smile on her down-turned face and crackling and popping of air.

After going in the competitors' entrance and taking up their position with one of the teams, Touma Kamijou saw the other team and paled. "(…Huh?! We're up against Tokiwadai Middle School?! Y-you better get ready, Tsuchimikado! The 'young lady' right over there could break the Tokyo Tower with her lightning attacks, and she'll be flinging them at us!!)"

"(…Nyaa. People rumor that if you add up their ability interference levels, they could invade the White House single-handedly. Careful not to get hit by any stray bullets, Kammy.)"

As they spoke to each other, aware that if the "young ladies" in question were to overhear them they'd get shot down instantly, they began their sure-to-fail

planning session.

"*Shorthand* is only the name of the formula. She wouldn't have actually set up a thick book anywhere, nya. The Divination Circle indicated this schoolyard, but I don't see anything immediately suspicious, do you?"

As Tsuchimikado said, there was nothing in the schoolyard that seemed sorcery-ish. The earthen grounds hosted ten basket-topped metal poles all in a row—they would be used for the ball-toss game. Scattered around them were red and white balls. Because there were more than two thousand students participating, the baskets were large and there was an immense number of balls.

If he were going to lay a trap, where would it be?

"Jeez. It would have been nice if she just used some old book."

"That's why she didn't. We don't know exactly what Oriana's planning, but it's stationary, and it has to be a magical trap. It could be disguised as doodles, scratches, coloring, or stains. But do you think I can't figure it out, Kammy? Onmyou is what I trained in. It includes the arts of feng shui, or geomancy, which involves setting up tricks using scenery and buildings. I can read this level of magical symbol no sweat. It's my field!" Tsuchimikado smiled a bit, his answer having come easily.

Kamijou thought for a moment. "Hey, Tsuchimikado, we're trying to figure out where Oriana's Shorthand is, right? It's a grimoire…and an original one on top of that, right? I remember that if people read one their minds break, but that doesn't mean everyone playing ball toss is going to just fall over, right?"

"No, probably not. The Shorthand grimoire—she put zero effort into making other people understand it. A grimoire with unreadable scrawls on it won't impart any tainted knowledge to the reader. I don't think you have to worry about that."

"Oh," said Kamijou, relieved.

Still, Tsuchimikado's expression hardened a bit. "The more important thing is how she actually set up the grimoire, nya. If she carved runes into a huge slab of rock, *that slab of rock itself would be treated as a grimoire*. I don't know how far-reaching its effects would be, but I hope she didn't put the Shorthand on

some gigantic object. There'd be more opportunities to touch it."

Kamijou looked over the other athletes' heads to the schoolyard. The only things here were the ten ball-toss basket-poles on either side and red and white balls scattered all over the ground.

"Leaving the baskets aside…So if she put the grimoire on one of those balls, that would be bad, huh? There are about twenty-five hundred people playing. They probably have at least twice that amount in balls of either color. Plus, *there are plenty of opportunities to touch them*."

Searching all of them would be an uphill battle to say the least, and the players would be grabbing and throwing them constantly. The random reordering would make it impossible for them to know which ones they'd already checked.

"I don't think so. The balls were probably thrown in here just a little while ago. The interception spell hit Stiyl back when they were still in the storage room. If that was the case, the Divination Circle would have traced it back to that storage room."

"Which means…?" Kamijou asked, looking between Tsuchimikado and the schoolyard.

"The baskets are suspect, nya. It looks like they were set up here quite a while ago. They had to place the balls around the baskets, so they would have had to decide where the baskets went beforehand, right? That means it's pretty likely she rigged her sorcery trick on one of them."

"But how…? There must have been spectators coming in while they were setting up, too. Wouldn't someone definitely notice her if she wandered in?" There was nothing in the schoolyard to obstruct the view, of course. Or had she disguised herself like Kamijou and Tsuchimikado had?

"No, she probably never got near the schoolyard. Kammy, you saw the security at the back gate, right? It would be a waste of energy to bust them up while running away…Those baskets might be borrowed from somewhere else, nya. I think Oriana put her Shorthand trick on one of them as they were being transported in, and then they brought it in like that."

"But they'd get hurt if they touched it, right? Wouldn't it have taken down

whoever transported it?”

“Oriana can probably estimate when to activate it and when to stop it. There are cameras going for the duration of the event. She could just look at one of the electronic scoreboards, too, and figure out how the preparations are going, nya!”

“Stop it…?” asked Kamijou.

Tsuchimikado smirked. “Oriana wants to keep the commotion to a minimum, too, so the deal can proceed in safety. She probably wants to turn it off after the event ends and the administrative committee starts packing up. Of course, it would be strange if she didn’t get far away from here by then, nya.”

Still, if anyone touched the Shorthand “grimoire” during the game, they’d be out. Taken down by a grimoire they didn’t know the appearance or location of. “Damn…Did she really think all that out at the beginning?”

“Who knows, nya? Maybe she actually didn’t think it through at all. Well, the event schedule is in the pamphlet. If she figured out beforehand how the administrative committee did their work based on those times, there’d be nothing she couldn’t do.”

As Tsuchimikado answered, the school broadcast speakers turned on. They heard a voice telling them to get to their positions. The flames of their battle against an absent enemy would soon be lit.

In an administrative committee tent on the edge of the campus, Seiri Fukiyose took the microphone. “To your positions!”

Her physical voice overlapped with her voice over the speaker. The committee members were responsible for a few different things, from recovering injured students to announcing the start and end of the game. The temporary TV channel studios would be doing their own commentary, but the administrative committee was held responsible for those announcements.

Another tiring job would be to count the balls in the baskets. With this many people in the game, there was an insane amount of balls. In fact, one-third of the time allotted to the game was specifically for counting them up.

“Get ready!”

Fukiyose would be announcing only the start of the game. Another committee member would be doing the ending announcements. When this was done, she'd have to start on counting the balls. It would be a pain in the butt, but something else made her wonder.

I thought someone was in that group…Maybe I'm just tired. Do I have enough vitamins? I know people say soybeans are good for tired heads. Then again, that shopping program says soybean isoflavone is basically good for everything—obesity, healthy blood, memory, skin, you name it!

Her questions unanswered, she made her last announcement.

"Go!!"

A whistle marked the beginning of the ball-toss game. The school broadcast speakers began to play a march frequently used for athletic meets. Completely ignoring its quick tempo, the students of both schools all immediately headed from the sides to the middle. Their destinations: the lines of three-meter-tall poles topped with baskets, but…

"Whoa! Kammy, I know this is sudden, but get down!!" shouted Tsuchimikado. Kamijou jumped sideways and went down to the ground, and a moment later, from the Tokiwadai Middle School team around their basket-poles some ten or twenty meters away, came red, blue, and yellow flashes of light shooting toward them. As they hit the ground, they created shock waves. Each shot swept away dozens of male students in clouds of dust and dirt.

"Hold on! They just got slammed *ten meters back*!!"

One portion of the crowd was almost entirely gone. There were ability-based attacks during the pole-toppling game Kamijou had been in not long ago, but this was on another level. There was now a crater in the dirt a few meters in diameter, and even the roiling clouds of dust and dirt were being blown away by the shock waves. He turned around, stunned, but despite the unsteadiness of the students getting back to their feet, none of them was hurt. When the blast hit, another esper from Tokiwadai must have used a defensive ability like air-bagging or shock-absorption. The young ladies were kind and obliging even to their enemies.

Unfortunately, Kamijou's right hand's Imagine Breaker might destroy such a

gracious defensive ability, and the incoming impacts could reopen the wound in Tsuchimikado's side.

"…"

"…"

They silently glanced at each other.

Even more red, blue, and yellow rays of light came at them, with thrown flames, electric lances, and vacuum bullets coming one after another.

"Th-they're messing around…! I'm pretty sure the event program said this was ball toss!"

"It's more like the *cannonball* toss at this point, nyaa!!"

As one group after another on their team found themselves rocked by the heavy artillery, Kamijou and Tsuchimikado made their way into the crowd. Prepared to die, they moved to the base of the line of basket-poles. Nobody was holding them up; they were stuck in the ground with metal stakes.

"(…Okay, Kammy. I'll check on each of the poles in order.)"

"(…Eh? Wait, isn't there something I can help with?)"

"(…I've made you do more than enough already. Just wait there, nya. You'll be up again once I find the Shorthand.)"

"(…Okay…I guess.)"

What should I do in the meantime? wondered Kamijou. For now he picked up a fallen white-team ball to keep up his disguise, but his actually participating would change the results of the match, so he didn't really feel like getting into it. Tsuchimikado was standing under the metal poles supporting the baskets, throwing balls up there, purposely not getting any of them in. Then he gave a nice long look at the pole's surface, from bottom to top. It was more than three meters high. Just craning your neck like that to check *one* of them seemed like a pain.

He was probably checking for the flash cards Oriana used before, as well as whether there were any strange characters carved into the support poles or odd marks on the stakes holding them in the ground. He was leaving no stone

unturned.

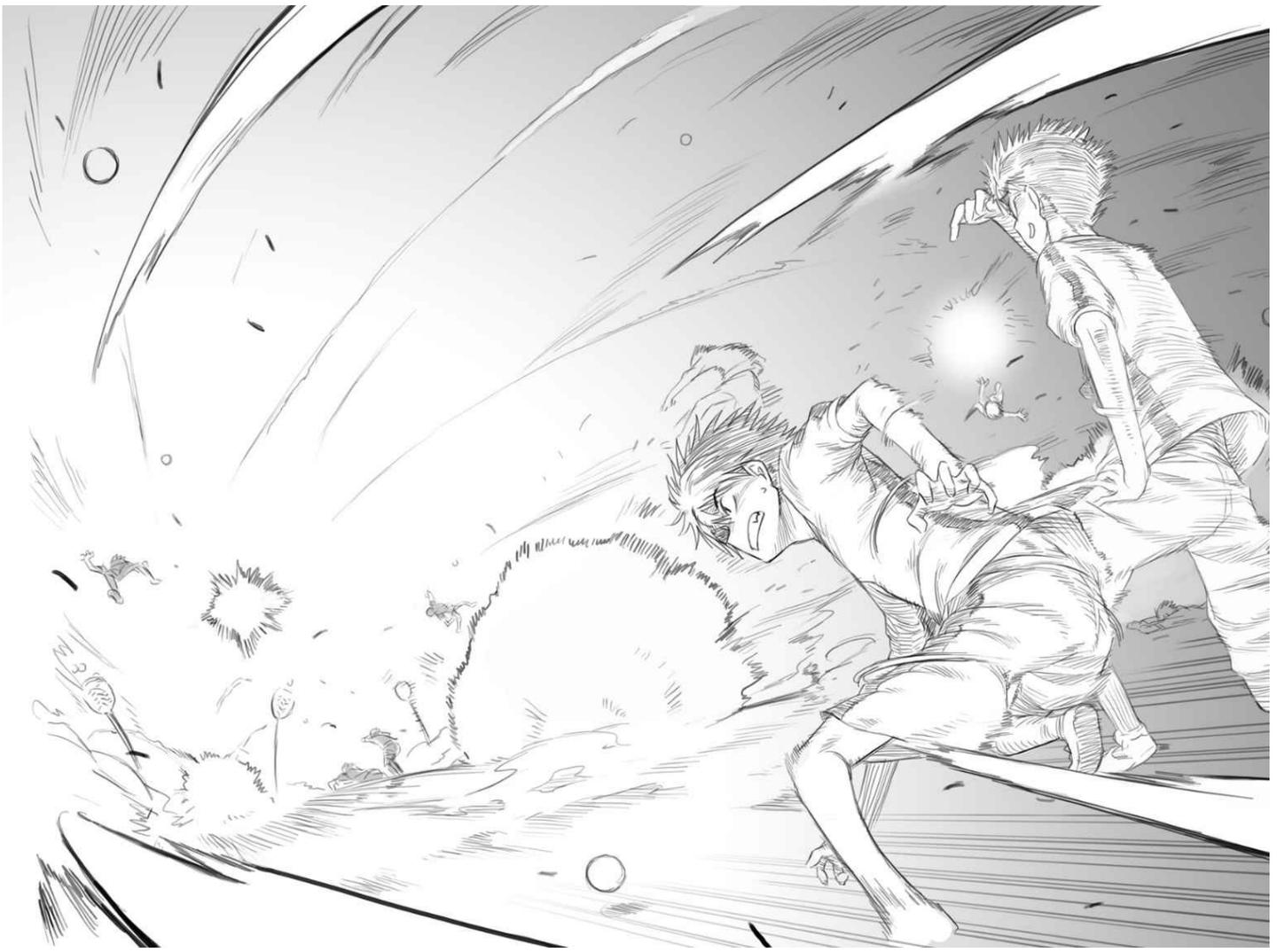
“(…Tsuchimikado!)”

“(…Not this one, Kammy.)” He shook his head and picked up a white ball, then headed for the next pole.

He checked the second and third basket-poles next to it, but he seemed to be coming up empty. Kamijou, doing nothing but watching, felt like time was going slowly. There were seven left. As Kamijou went to follow Tsuchimikado, a white flash of light suddenly burst out from beside him.

“Yikes!” He frantically got his right hand up as the round bullet of light shot toward him. As it made contact with his hand, it exploded with a light-shattering noise. Farther away, he saw a girl from Tokiwadai Middle School with her jaw dropped, but he didn’t bother with her. He couldn’t let them pay him any undue attention. Instead, he lightly elbowed the male student right next to him who had frozen in fear and gave him a word of thanks. He’d let him take the credit.

“(…Kammy, it’s not the fourth one, either. Let’s go to the next.)”



With a sidelong glance to the provoked Tokiwadai girl firing a focused barrage at the male student, he followed Tsuchimikado to the fifth pole.

Then, suddenly, the wall of people wavered. A group of male students who were all looking up at the baskets and throwing balls was run into from behind, and they started falling like dominoes. As a single unit, they crashed into the fifth basket-pole. With a metallic *gong*, the pole shook. If Oriana had put her interception spell Shorthand on the fifth pole…then the victims would multiply. They'd end up with something like severe sunstroke, like what had happened to Stiyl. Someone with no resistance to magic could even die from this sorcery.

"Damn it!!" Tsuchimikado hurriedly sprinted for the group. Kamijou was about to follow him when his feet stopped moving.

The fifth basket-pole tipped. It began to fall, and then it crashed into the sixth pole. That, too, tipped and began to fall. There was a girl from Tokiwadai right where the metal pole was going to fall. She looked up blankly, a red ball in each hand, and stared as the thirty-kilogram blunt object came slowly toward her—like her mind hadn't yet caught up with the sudden event.

Kamijou ran in that direction, but the male students who had caused the domino effect on the fifth pole were infinitely annoying. "Goddamn it! Tsuchimikado!!" he shouted, stepping on Tsuchimikado's back as he headed toward the fifth pole and jumping off it into the dominoes area. His high jump made him lose his balance midflight, but he still managed to grab the back of the collar of the girl's athletic shirt. Unable to break his fall, he crashed to the ground, but he used the momentum to pull the girl to the side, getting her out of the falling basket-pole's path.

Then, a flame bullet from an esper exploded a little ways away from them. The sixth pole swayed in the blast, changing direction and coming back toward them. It would be at least ten times the strength of a metal baseball bat if it hit them.

Shit! Don't come this way after we already dodged!!

With his unstable posture right after slamming into the ground, it was impossible for him to jump a second time. He moved his body that was racked with pain from the impact and shoved the frozen girl, at least, out of the way. She was surprised—she didn't seem to understand what was really happening

until the end.

…Urgh!! Kamijou found himself clenching his teeth. The more-than-thirty-kilogram metal pole fell toward him.

A moment later, however…

With a deafening, church bell–like *gong*, the sixth pole *bounced to the side*. As the orange ray of light hit it, it split right in half, bounded along the ground, landed dozens of meters away, and continued to slide. All the students nearby flinched away at first, but within seconds they had returned to their frantic battle. Even then, the remnants of the basket-pole clanged and clanked, bouncing across the ground.

The Railgun.

One of the Level Five abilities—to fire a bullet at three times the speed of sound.

As Touma Kamijou stumbled to his feet, he saw Tokiwadai's ace, bouncing a silver coin on her thumb, sparks flying from her body: Mikoto Misaka.

Their eyes met.

Kamijou managed a weak laugh. "Eheh-heh…"

"Are you serious…? Do you want to get me to do whatever you like *that badly*?!" Unblinking, she began pelting him with electric spears.

"Wh-whoa!! You there, the girl! Get away from here before you end up getting hit by a stray bullet from *that*! I'll hold her back, so you run away! Hurry!!" He frantically blocked the electric spears with his right hand, repelling them.

The girl behind him he'd just saved shouted, "Thank you very much and I'm sorry," bowing politely multiple times before fleeing the battlefield at an extremely fast sprint. She disappeared very quickly into the mass of clashing espers and supernatural powers.

Kamijou exhaled, then spoke in a soft voice, without turning around. "If you have that much energy, I'm sure you'll be fine."

"So tell me: Why is it you snuck into someone else's event…?" Mikoto put a hand to her forehead amid the uproar, seeming exhausted. Her other small hand

went for whatever was close by—in this case, the seventh basket-pole.

"Stop! Wait, Misaka!!"

"Wh-what?" Startled, she pulled her hand back a little. It hovered in the air like that.

Kamijou wasn't looking at her. He was examining the seventh pole closely. There was something there, right about the same height as where Mikoto Misaka was about to put her hand.

About as big as a stick of gum…a thick, rectangular piece of paper. He couldn't read it from here, but he thought he could make out tiny letters written on it. *A flash card?! Is that what she used for her Shorthand grimoire?!* He felt a chill run down his spine. The feeling spread instantly through his body and he froze. *So that was it…Tsuchimikado said she used a special Shorthand grimoire for the interception spell, but that wasn't it.* ***Her little flash-card papers—every one of them is its own Shorthand grimoire, isn't it?!***

This was bad. There was about a meter and fifty centimeters from him to Mikoto. She was relatively close, but he couldn't reach her with his hand. The vertically hanging piece of thick paper was stuck to the pole with a single piece of cellophane tape at the top. Every time the breeze came through, it fluttered. There were about three centimeters between her hand and the support beam. A stiff wind blowing through—that would be all it took *for it to touch*.

Kamijou remembered how Stiyl had collapsed so suddenly and sucked in a breath. Choosing his words carefully and using a slow voice, he began to speak to the girl at the center of the crisis. "Listen, Misaka. I'll explain later. Get away from there. It's important."

"What??? What the heck are you talking about?"

He supposed he should have seen that coming. Mikoto frowned. Her hand… remained unmoving. It didn't go forward, maintaining its three-centimeter distance exactly.

The paper fluttered a little. Mikoto didn't know what that meant.

"Hey, you think you're in a position to give me orders right now? Why are you even here? Now that those poles fell over, I'm not even sure we can keep playing

anyway, so I'm expecting a good explanation—"

Just then, he heard a gust of wind. The sound came from behind him. A male student on the team opposing Tokiwadai had fired an earth spear straight at Mikoto. It seemed to be accelerating because of his ability; it stabbed through the air with the speed of a metal arrow. If that hit, it might even break a few ribs.

Mikoto was surprised at the abrupt attack and moved to intercept, flashes sparking from her bangs, when…

"You stay out of this!!"

Before she could do anything, he stuck his right arm straight in front of him. His fist got in between the earth spear and Mikoto, and when it hit, the entire spear shattered.

Dust kicked up, staining Kamijou's cheeks, but he didn't wipe them. He just kept staring at Mikoto Misaka as though there was no time for him to do that.

"Id…" Mikoto looked between the remains of the earth spear and Kamijou in turn. "Idiot! Why did you block an ally's attack? I-it's not like I couldn't have handled it without your help! Besides, what's so important, anyway? Was it important enough for you to sneak all the way in here?"

"I said I'll explain later! Misaka, just get away from there!!"

"Argh! Why don't you ever listen to what anyone's saying?! You're the one who should be getting away from here!!" Mikoto tried to punch the pole to vent her anger.

Despite himself, Kamijou shouted. "Wait, Misaka! Don't say anything! Just come over here, please!! It's dangerous there! I don't want you to get hurt!!"

Mikoto grunted and stopped moving. For some reason, her face began to flush red. Her eyes darted to and fro, leaving her head behind, as though evading him. "You don't need to worry so much about a little game. With my ability, I could, you know, handle anyone who, uh, tried to attack me…"

Kamijou wasn't listening to whatever it was she was saying. There was no time for that. He watched her each and every movement with total focus. He felt a bead of sweat trickle down his cheek. He wiped it with the back of his right hand,

then felt the roughness of sand on it.

On the other hand, Mikoto, under his watchful glare at this very moment, groaned a little, straightened her back, then brought her wobbling hand away from the pole and to her chest. A few moments later, all of a sudden, she shook her head violently several times.

For now…I guess this is okay? Wait, why's her face getting red???

Despite his questions, Mikoto's hand was now a good distance away from the piece of paper attached to the pole's support beam. But the moment he felt relief…

"Jeez! Please don't start running your mouth and scaring me like that!"

…her straightened shoulders drooped…

…and as part of her tired motion, she reached her right hand for the pole.

"Damn it!!"

Kamijou immediately moved forward. The paper whipped around in the wind. Barely a moment before her palm touched it, he collided with her. He kept their momentum going, dropping his weight, wrapping his arms around her slender body, and pushing her right down onto the ground.

"Huh? What?"

Mikoto looked up at him from the ground as he hovered over her, both her hands at her chest, frozen in place.

"I, uh, wh-whaaaat…?"

Her face grew so red it looked about to explode. She couldn't manage any actual words. Kamijou's expression grew more serious. "Quiet. Don't move for a sec."

With Mikoto still under him on the ground, he got a closer look at her face. He couldn't tell one way or the other; he didn't know much about sorcery. However, his amateur's observation told him the red in her face made her look a lot like she was in pain. *He said the symptoms were like heavy sunstroke…*He brought his face even closer to get a better look.

“Hee…I…er…”

After blinking a few times and seeing Kamijou’s serious face closing in, she took a guess at what was happening and eventually closed her eyes slowly.

When he saw that, he clicked his tongue in dismay and hastily put his right hand on her forehead. “Shit…Does it hurt that much, Misaka?! Your body temperature…damn, it’s rising. And your face is all red, too!!”

Surprised by his shout, Mikoto started flailing impatiently. “H-hey! I’m not red! My face is not red! And I don’t have a fever, either!!”

Huh? Kamijou pulled his face back. Normal people would suffer worse symptoms than Stiyl, so she must not have touched the basket-pole. Still, he knew where Oriana’s flash card—the interception spell—was. “Tsuchimikado, over here!” he shouted. “It’s the seventh pole—” Suddenly he broke off.

Because he finally saw it.

The piece of paper taped to the seventh pole. The only thing written on it was PROPERTY OF NOGI MIDDLE SCHOOL.

Tsuchimikado had told him these poles were probably borrowed from elsewhere. This was basically just a name tag so they wouldn’t lose it.

I was wrong?! Then where’s the actual Shorthand grimoire?! He quickly looked around. Then he heard a whistle through the area. The march playing over the school broadcast system stopped suddenly.

A moment later, *a hand grasped the eighth pole*.

“Good grief. What are you doing here, Touma Kamijou?”

A question for him.

“I will listen to what you have to say later, so be good and go away for now. We’re probably going to have to restart the event. With so many baskets down, there’s no way to continue the match fairly.”

Seiri Fukiyose, administrative committee member, looked at him in confusion. She wore a light parka over her gym uniform.

“Can you hear me? Are you trying to make me consume more calcium?”

Kamijou wasn't looking at her clothing, though. Or listening to her voice, for that matter.

Her hand.

Between her soft palm and the metal pole *was a single piece of thick paper*.

It was taped to the pole.

He wanted desperately to believe it was just a property tag like the seventh pole.

But then he saw, in blue lettering, *some kind of English letters*.

A loud *rrrrip* burst through the air.

Fukiyose teetered over sideways.

"Fu…"

Her hand left the pole, limp. The only thing written beneath where it had been was WIND SYMBOL.

"Fukiyoseeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!"

He didn't get a reply. She fell away from the pole and crumpled to the ground with a *thud*. There was no energy whatsoever in her fall. She lay there, limbs sprawled, unmoving, reminding him of a flabby leather bag.

Then, from all around her came a crackling sort of noise from the air, like it was a creaking floorboard.

"Wh-what?" stammered Mikoto, confused.

She, however, was likely the only player present who noticed something strange. A few of the other students looked suspicious, but they couldn't have thought this to be the work of an unknown magical attack. Besides, the stadium was packed with espers of all kinds. It would take something more than a little strange to make them think something was wrong.

And then Tsuchimikado finally made it to him. "(…Kammy, go hit her! She's no sorcerer. She won't last!!)"

Kamijou finally snapped out of his thoughts. He ran over to the fallen Fukiyose and, pretending to help lift her up, put his right hand around to her back. A soft

fshhh of air being sucked out, but…

Even then, *strength didn't return to her body*.

"Shit…" He knew the logic behind it. She and Stiyl Magnus had different resistances to magic. Even Stiyl, a professional, had taken a lot of damage. Anyone could imagine the result of a completely unprepared amateur getting hit by the attack.

However…that didn't mean he could stop asking himself one question: *Why?*

"Tsuchimikado!!"

"Stay calm, Kammy. This is just her body under too much stress from her life force running idly—it's no more than severe sunstroke. We should get her to the first aid office…No, not there. If we call an ambulance, we might still make it. It's way better than having her lie here under this sun," he said, offering a solution.

There was nothing conclusive about those words, though. It was like he was implying he couldn't offer groundless optimism, being the professional that he was. Kamijou could hear several committee members come running out of the tent raised on the edge of the schoolyard. Faculty members here and there, too —maybe they'd caught wind of the trouble. In their eyes, he and Tsuchimikado would have looked like they didn't know how to care for the female student who'd suddenly collapsed. The committee and faculty snatched Fukiyose from his hands and immediately made a phone call.

Touma Kamijou, left alone, stood slowly. His head was still down. But then, at a terrifying speed, his fist whipped out in front of him. There was a loud metallic *gong*, and Oriana's paper vibrated on the pole. Mikoto looked at him, surprised, but he didn't notice. The characters on the paper, having been stricken by his right hand, began to fade away.

"Have it your way, Oriana Thomson…," he said, his trembling lips moving slowly. "If this is how you want to do things…If getting innocent people involved and watching while feeling nothing is how it's gonna be…"

He lifted up his face and looked straight ahead, making his declaration.

"…then my hand will wreck that insane illusion of yours until there's nothing left."

INTERLUDE TWO

It hurts.

So thought Seiri Fukiyose amid the murk and haze in her mind. She knew she was lying on a stretcher right now. She managed to figure out she'd been taken out of an ambulance and was being rolled into a hospital emergency room.

But it didn't feel real.

She couldn't tell up from down, front from back, right from left. She didn't know whether it was because of how the stretcher was swinging around or if it was her. The adults around her shouted something, probably to see how conscious she was, but she couldn't really make it out. All she could hear was the kind of slurred, meaningless voices of drunkards. For some reason, though, the word *sunstroke* made it to her.

Sunstroke.

Not an uncommon condition during gym class or school assemblies, so it tended to be taken lightly. But the root cause was sudden dehydration. If it got worse, it could result in death. This wasn't the first time she'd gotten sunstroke. Despite her state, she could imagine what had caused her to collapse.

She had never experienced a sequence of events like this, though. Her headaches would stop once they got to a certain point, but now she felt like it was getting worse and worse, the pain growing deeper and deeper.

*…Urgh…*As a member of the Daihasei Festival administrative committee, she had taken a lecture on simple first aid. She was more acutely aware than other students that sunstroke was nothing to be trifled with.

What did I do wrong? she thought. She had hydration, and that was keeping

her body heat to an appropriate level. This wasn't due to exhaustion, lack of sleep, or sickness, either. She had been perfect in her preparations. Why had this happened so suddenly despite them?

Which means…the only thing left…

Nervousness?

Had she been so tense this whole time?

Such a psychogenic issue, surprisingly, was something that hadn't seemed *real* to her. She considered it in a curious, reflective way. She had done quite a lot of preparation in the days before, all for today. If she failed now, everything would have been for nothing. All the laughs and hard work during setup with the other committee members, devoting herself to memorizing procedures for judging, going over the event schedules with everyone at the café on their way home—it would all be overwritten by a single word: *failure*. Maybe she really had been nervous and just hadn't realized it.

…What am I…an idiot…?

Trying to make herself look big, making a show out of collapsing, single-handedly ruining the event…She felt like she must have had this coming to her. She even decided she should retire from the Daihasei Festival right away—she'd caused enough of a nuisance and didn't want to anymore.

Because this was all her fault.

So then…

Why…?

Why had that boy, with his face an absolute mess, cried out like that?

That didn't seem like a reaction to simple sunstroke to her. His expression implied something unexpected had just happened. But more particular—like he'd assumed a certain level of trouble beforehand, and this was outside its scope. It was less an attitude toward a sudden situation and more like he'd prepared defenses in advance and someone had broken through them.

What did he know? What did he regret? She wanted to know. But more than that…

*I don't want that…*Her lips moved slightly. He always seemed so lighthearted, like he'd never take anything seriously no matter what anyone said. The fact that he could make a face like that surprised her. And then she frowned. At the same time, it meant the boy could go on looking like that for the entire remainder of the Daihasei Festival schedule*…I really…don't want that…*

She didn't particularly like or dislike Touma Kamijou. Frankly, he was a complete stranger. But the whole reason she'd been helping the administrative committee set up for the festival was so everyone could have a good time. It didn't have anything to do with whether she liked or disliked someone on a personal level. She absolutely didn't want to create a situation in an event this big where one person had his head down the whole time, alone.

Because *she* had been involved with this event. Because *she*'d been pouring everything she had into this day. Maybe it was selfish of her, but she still wanted this event to be a huge success—for everyone.

The stretcher carrying her in her daze entered through the emergency entrance and went into a building. There was a doctor in white clothing waiting for them. His face looked just like a frog, and she nearly accidentally laughed.

The frog-faced doctor began giving out directions with much quicker movements than his looks would imply. Fukiyose, barely conscious, couldn't make out what he was saying. Her head was throbbing. It was like a bunch of the cogs in her mind had gone offtrack; her awareness was fading large bits at a time, denying any chance of organizing her thoughts. Only the words *severe sunstroke* rang and rang inside her skull. Brought on by sudden dehydration—harmful to the circulatory system if it gets worse—organs losing function after internal oxygen and nutrient-distribution patterns collapsed—and in the worst case, death.

The danger of sunstroke varied widely based on how bad it was. If it worsened, she would fall into a state of shock like a switch was flipped, and her entire body would cry out in pain.

Her teeth grated.

She didn't want to die.

She herself didn't properly understand what it was she was so scared of. Was it

the waves of headaches and chills coming over her, or was it the uncertainty of not knowing how she was going to turn out? She barely narrowed it down to even those two choices. A muddy mixture of emotions tortured her mind.

She couldn't tell what the people around her were saying. She couldn't determine how grave a situation her body was in. So she ignored all that and asked one thing.

"…Will…you save…me…?"

She couldn't tell if she actually spoke, and she wasn't confident her lips were even moving.

However, the frog-faced doctor stopped giving directions and looked at her. In her hazy consciousness, unable to hear anyone else's voice, for some reason his words reached her ears.

He spoke but one sentence to the girl on the stretcher.

Along with a perfect smile to grant absolute trust.

"——Just who do you think I am?"

CHAPTER 4

Shall the Battle End In Victory
Being_Unsettled.

1

Stiyl Magnus sat on the ground in the automatic bus service facility. Periodically and for a while now, *technicians checking on the maintenance machines* had been coming and going, but Stiyl seemed to be right in a blind spot for them. No one had noticed him there. Normally he wouldn't have to worry about this if he'd been able to use an Opila rune, but at the moment, he couldn't.

My trump card gone, and this is how I end up? I just never learn…

He exhaled bitterly. Thinking back, the same thing had happened when he used Innocentius to attack Touma Kamijou at the end of July. Immediately after losing his trump card, he would get weaker. He'd put in a lot of effort to reflect on that, but basically all he'd come up with were methods to prevent his trump card from being lost—like using illusion-based evasion magic tactics or laminating his rune cards. He felt now like he'd neglected to consider the more fundamental issues.

Can you protect her after making such a sorry display of yourself…? If they'd been after her this time, what would you have done, you third-rate sorcerer…?

Then his cell phone rang, cutting off his thoughts. He took it out of his breast pocket and pushed the call button. It was Tsuchimikado.

"Kammy busted Oriana's Shorthand grimoire. Feeling any different, nya?"

"You say that, but I don't feel much…" Slowly and carefully, Stiyl brought out a single rune card. He inhaled deeply, held it, then exhaled again before muttering something to himself.

There was a little pop, and with it an orange flame ignited at the tip of his

index finger. No sign of the interception spell and the full-body rejection response. "…It works. There doesn't seem to be a problem."

"Great. Then I'll leave the Four Ways to Truth spell to you. I set up the origami and magic circle in the right places beforehand. Do you know how to use it?"

"Don't underestimate me," answered Stiyl. At his feet were the circle Tsuchimikado had drawn and one piece of origami at each ninety-degree interval on it. In the center was the thick piece of paper Oriana had left behind. He didn't understand the placement method for this Onmyou technique, but triggering a rental spell wouldn't be difficult. "Are you all set on your end, though? You said Oriana placed the interception spell in the middle of a stadium. If you snuck in, you won't be able to get back out until the event ends, right?"

It would be hard for them to infiltrate the event but just as hard to escape it. If a couple of people tried to sneak outside, people would see them whether they liked it or not.

Tsuchimikado's reply, however, was light. "No problem there, nya! We're already outside the stadium."

"…How?"

"One of the students got hit right in front of us. They're taking her to the hospital, saying it's severe sunstroke. She was unconscious, and we pretended to bring her off the field, then made our escape."

His voice didn't have the same sportive glee it usually did. Stiyl knew that was the voice of a sorcerer. "I see," he said. "Is Touma Kamijou going mad?"

"If you know what you're doing, I'll leave it to you. We want to counterattack soon, too. If we don't, we won't be able to face that student who went down."

Tsuchimikado hung up. "Right," said Stiyl, returning the phone to his pocket. *Nobody's perfect. He beat me once, but even he'll fail sometimes.*

But he continued. "—And that's exactly why he'll regret his inexperience."

Touma Kamijou knew this best of all—he was unable to save someone right in front of him. So Stiyl wouldn't say anything more on the matter. He stayed silent and did what he needed to do. He didn't realize it, but it was like he was trying

not to put any more of a burden on the boy.

The four origami began to revolve, and the Four Ways to Truth magic circle activated…in order to find Oriana Thomson's location.

2

In the center of a large road swarming with people stood Oriana Thomson, looking up at an electronic scoreboard. Most of the people weren't paying any mind to the happenings being displayed on the screen. Even if a few were, they would only be slightly interested in an event being temporarily suspended due to an emergency case. It was to be expected. It was news only of a single person in an emergency, so they must not have found much to talk about.

On the surface, at least.

"…What's this?" she whispered, with the signboard-like object wrapped in white cloth under her arm. Her whole body, clad in the work uniform with only the second button buttoned and her navel exposed, expressed a feeling of tension. "An unexpected development…?"

Then she took her eyes off the scoreboard, though, and began to walk. There was something she needed to do. Her fingers dug into the object under her arm.

Touma Kamijou and Motoharu Tsuchimikado ran down the road, mostly pushing people out of the way. The pedestrians gave them bothered glances, but the two of them had no time to apologize. As they ran, they were listening to Stiyl's voice from over Tsuchimikado's cell phone on speaker.

"I've located Oriana Thomson. She's close to the Futsuka subway station in District 7. With a little more time, I can give you a more accurate reading."

"Futsuka Station?! We already passed that!"

Kamijou skidded to a halt and turned back the way he came. A few moments later he made a turn and dove onto a smaller road. Tsuchimikado had been taking the initiative in their pursuit before, but now it was all in Kamijou's hands. It was the professional's turn to get pulled every which way.

"Northward…Yes, it seems she's moving north. The road…splits into three, but I can't tell which one it is. Let me figure it out…"

Before they finished listening, Kamijou and Tsuchimikado made it out of the small road. Then they saw the stairs down to the subway station, snug up against the edge of the sidewalk. They continued to run north on the road.

“Of the three paths…Come on…come on…There we go. Listen—”

“The leftmost path! Found her!!” shouted Kamijou as the blond woman walking twenty meters ahead of them spun around.

After spotting the two of them shoving their way through the crowds, she hastily fled down a side road. Kamijou and Tsuchimikado followed suit. The side road was short, and they soon came onto another. Unlike the main roads, however, it wasn’t a glittering scene of festivity. Small tenements were packed onto it, so it didn’t even feel welcoming to visitors, either. There was an arch erected over the road like it was a shopping arcade, but it only seemed to make it harder to see.

The shops all had their shutters down even though it was barely afternoon; the people managing the places probably knew that visitors wouldn’t come down this street in the first place. They’d probably set up temporary shops closer to the stadiums, where people were more likely to see them.

The street ended in a T intersection, with a road going to the left and the right. Oriana Thomson, in her work uniform, was running down the left street. As Kamijou and Tsuchimikado chased, an automatic bus drove by them from behind. Kamijou watched it pass without much thought, but a moment later he gave a start. There was a bus stop where Oriana was headed.

“Crap…!!” Oriana was holding down some sort of signal button at the bus stop to get the automatic bus to stop there. Sure enough, the bus slowed to a halt without any doubts in its mechanical mind. Its doors opened automatically, and she stepped inside the vehicle.

They wouldn’t be able to catch up with a bus on foot. Getting another one would make actually *pursuing* her difficult, too. General vehicles were forbidden from entering the streets for the duration of the Daihasei Festival, so they couldn’t get a different car. Kamijou didn’t have the skill to drive one anyway.

The automatic bus would respond only to predefined commands. If there were a driver and they ran after the bus from behind, waving their hands, he or she

might stop the bus, thinking they had just missed it. Unfortunately, that was asking too much of a self-driving bus.

Kamijou frantically began to run, but he was twenty meters away. Before he could get there, the bus had already set off again, almost silently.

“Shit!!” Kamijou finally got to the bus stop and pressed the button, but he was too late. The running vehicle didn’t respond; it just slowly accelerated.

Tsuchimikado got there a moment later. Looking at the shrinking bus, he said, “Hey, Kammy. I couldn’t see. Were there other people in that bus she got on, nya?”

“Huh? Who cares about that?!” retorted Kamijou, irritated at the extremely easygoing tone of his voice.

Then Tsuchimikado said, “No, it’s actually pretty important.”

“…I don’t think there were.”

“Think?”

“There weren’t! Yes, now that I think about it, there weren’t any other passengers! Everyone probably got off the bus to watch the relay-race qualifiers for group A that they’re doing this morning nearby. They’re calling it the highlight of day one, since it’s got all the potential festival winners in it or something. I think that’s what it said in the pamphlet. Why’s that important?!”

“Oh, that’s good, then…Stiyl?” Tsuchimikado spoke not to Kamijou but to Stiyl over the phone. “You put rune cards on the sides of the buses at the repair yard, didn’t you? If they’re still working, I’d like to place an order. **Blow up the card on the vehicle numbered 5154457.**”

The response was immediate.

Bang!!

Flames erupted from the side of the slowly accelerating bus. A moment later there was an explosion inside the vehicle, and its back went sliding across the road. When it became perpendicular to the street, the momentum rolled it over onto its side. Now a giant hunk of flaming metal, it bounded and rolled across the ground. The flames, erupting up out of it, touched the shopping arcade roof

and began to spread.

Tsuchimikado clicked his flip phone closed with one hand. “Effective…Maybe *too* effective, nya?” he said, grinning in a worried way.

Kamijou was at a loss for words as he stared at the blazing bus. Obviously their goal was to stop Oriana, but wasn’t this a little outside the realm of just “stopping” her?

Tsuchimikado looked at him and seemed to realize what he wanted to say. “No, no, see? All I was thinking was that there would be a little fire, and the bus’s safety features would kick in and stop it! Damn it. I mistook it for an electric car, nya. That looks like a hybrid—it probably uses gasoline, too,” he finished, not seeming too nervous. “Well, look at it this way. All the shop people seem to be working away from home today, and the shopping arcade roof prevents satellites and those unmanned helicopters from seeing. It won’t be a big deal.”

“H-how can you be so calm?! Is there a fire extinguisher around here?! If we don’t save her, she might actually *die*!!”

“Hmm. *I wonder about that.*”

Suddenly, as Tsuchimikado finished, there was a windy roar as the pillar of burning fire began to whirl around. The huge flames dispersed as though blown away by a tornado originating inside it and vanished without a trace. What blew away the fire was a wind dense with moisture—a mist. Kamijou looked back to see a thin layer of water covering the wreckage of the bus that had been burning just a moment ago. It probably worked the same as leaves getting wet in the evening dew. The misty winds had coated everything in the vicinity in a light blanket of moisture. This water, though, apparently wouldn’t evaporate in normal flames. By taking away everything that could feed the fire and blocking its path, it had extinguished it.

And standing at the middle of the mist and wind was one woman. Her hair, face, work outfit, and belly button were all wet with a thin layer of water—it was Oriana Thomson. She had her signboard-like object under her right arm, a ring of flash cards in her left hand, and a single page of it in her mouth. The blue letters on it spelled out the words *Wind Symbol* in English.

She spat out the card. A slender thread of saliva followed it as she smiled comfortably. “Hee-hee. Flames infused with mana and will are one thing, but it takes more than a simple physical fire to get me hot and bothered. It looks like I jumped the gun and got a little wet anyway, though. Want to see? I’m soaked all the way through to my underwear.”

Even now, the only things coming out of her mouth were jokes. Touma Kamijou narrowed his eyes in suspicion at that fact. Only a little, but he still did it. “…You hurt a completely innocent person with that spell you set up. You remember? It was that girl I was with when I first ran into you. Did she *look* like she had anything to do with sorcery?”

“Nobody in the world is unrelated. If the mood is right, anyone can create relationships with anybody else.”

“You…you do understand me. And you still don’t feel sorry, do you?” Kamijou’s voice was flat.

Oriana scowled a little upon hearing it. “I don’t want to be complaining at this point, but it’s true that I didn’t intend to hurt that girl. Even I hesitate to hurt regular people. *Unlike this one here*,” she said, tearing off a flash card with her teeth. A clear *clang* rang out, like two glass edges bumping into each other.

And at that moment…

“Gah…!!” groaned Motoharu Tsuchimikado as he doubled over. Holding his side with one hand and trembling fiercely, he stared at Oriana.

“Tsuchimikado!!” Kamijou hurried over to him. His wound still looked closed, but his face was white. Maybe the damage from before was getting to him; he was moving around with an injury.

Oriana watched and giggled. “Oh my. And here I thought *you* were the one who was hurt. I wonder if I used this the wrong way.” Between her lips was a flash card with the words *Fire Symbol* written in blue.

Tsuchimikado faltered.

He faltered and began slowly falling to the ground.

Oriana smiled thinly. “You seem to be somewhat resistant…but you’ll need more than that to resist my wiles.”

As soon as she spoke, Tsuchimikado collapsed, his body unable to endure further strain. All the energy had left his limbs.

“What? What did you do to him?!”

“I simply used blue lettering to cancel the fire aspect, symbol of regeneration and recovery. It uses sound as a medium to enter the body through the ear canal. *The spell causes anyone with a certain level of injury to pass out.* The bell sound from before was the key to turning it on…but I see your wounds weren’t as great.”

Kamijou touched Tsuchimikado with his right hand, but it didn’t do anything. Actually, it was more like the effects kept coming back every time he erased them. Unlike the interception spell from before, with this one, the effects probably wouldn’t go away unless he destroyed the original card. *A spell to make a person faint if they’re hurt enough…*That meant the fainting effects might

continue to trigger as long as the spell's condition of wounds being on Tsuchimikado's body wasn't taken away. Kamijou's Imagine Breaker couldn't heal the wound itself, so touching him like this wouldn't free him.

He glared at Oriana. She responded with an amused look, grabbing the fainting amulet with her left hand. Then she tossed it into the air, letting it flutter in the wind. Immediately, the thin flash-card ring caught the wind and she began to fly backward.

Kamijou's face reddened with anger. "Get back here!!"

However, Oriana's whole body shivered as though even his anger felt good. She wet her lips with her tongue. "If you want to save him, then you'll need to beat me as soon as you can. If not, he'll be waiting until I say otherwise. Though I wonder if he'll last that long. Maybe he'll actually succumb quickly, you know?"

Kamijou's teeth clattered. In anger. "Why?" he managed, squeezing out the words.

Motoharu Tsuchimikado…

If nothing bad had happened, he would have left aside his spy job and gone to the Daihasei Festival. If there wasn't a job he needed to do, he'd be enjoying himself and making a ruckus with everyone else.

Stiyl Magnus, too…

If Oriana hadn't caused this incident, he wouldn't have had to prepare for battle. He probably wouldn't have come to Academy City, and even if he had, it might have been to see his old friend Index for the first time in a while.

And Seiri Fukiyose, too…

Kamijou didn't know what she wanted out of being an administrative committee member for the festival. But if it wasn't something she'd been forced to do—if she wanted to do it—then she would have had a goal.

Maybe none of that was very important for a professional sorcerer. Compared to the Stab Sword, which could throw the world into chaos, maybe it wasn't important at all.

"I don't know how valuable this Stab Sword thing is. I don't know how much it

could change the course of history or in what way it could change the world. I probably don't have the right idea." He paused. "But I know this much. It's not right to hurt someone over a piece of shit like that. If the Stab Sword can make only shitty things happen, then I'll destroy the damn thing myself!!"

Oriana Thomson smiled thinly at his words. There was no point in listening—and just listening made it seem so funny she had to laugh. It was like she was saying the people who had gotten wrapped up in this weren't worth much to her. She spoke. "It would sound cool if I said I was just doing my job, but that would be insincere toward my client." As a matter of fact, there wasn't a hint of seriousness in her voice. "Leaving the end goal aside, she left it up to me to figure out how to get there."

A twisted heat ran rampant inside Kamijou. His clenched teeth felt about to shatter. "Don't…you dare…" He gripped his right fist and looked upon his *enemy*.

"…play around with people's lives like that!!"

He leaped straight ahead. Oriana watched him and continued to smile—ever amused.

3

Kamijou was less than ten meters away from Oriana. His fist would never reach her, though. With a flick of her left hand, she simply put a flash card in her mouth and bit down on it. On it were the words *Wind Symbol*, written in green.

A moment later, in between the two of them, a fifty-centimeter-thick wall of ice spread across the street. Their eyes locked from across the clear ice. The wall was huge—three meters tall. Kamijou ignored it and punched it with his right hand.

Crash!! There was the sound of glass breaking. The wall shattered at once like gunpowder had been planted inside it.

Oriana wasn't on the other side. She, too, began to shatter along with the ice. Like a portrait depicted in stained glass breaking apart. Kamijou gasped, then considered what had just happened. *What was the ice for…?* Then, with a chill, he realized it. ***To refract the light?!***

A sonic blast ripped toward him from the side. He swung his right hand in that direction without turning. The incoming wind blade burst like a balloon released from compression. Then he squinted against the gusts hitting him from the front.

Just then, there was a *scrape*.

It felt like his cheek skin was being pulled and cut off. Blood began to flow in big drops from the gash before the pain hit him.

“Hmm-hmm. The sharpness is quite stimulating, isn’t it?”

He looked to see that Oriana had bitten off another flash card and activated a spell. The super-thin stone blade had flown toward him and ripped into his cheek.

“Hee-hee-hee. I remember when we first shook hands. Academy City has some pretty unique kids, doesn’t it?”

She seemed to be referring to his right hand. He wasn’t able to respond, though. The wound—it was so big he could check with his finger how big it was. And Oriana was *keeping a spell that would make him faint for sure when he heard it, as long as he was injured enough!*

Oh…shit…!! Kamijou subconsciously covered his ears as the chill came over him.

Meanwhile, Oriana took yet another card in her mouth.

“Next is a sword of shadow. Don’t let me get bored, now!”

The moment she tore it off, she waved her right hand and a dark sword appeared in it. Apparently it could extend and retract freely, since it quickly grew to seven meters long. It stabbed Kamijou’s shadow, stretched out behind him on the ground.

Boom!! The shadow at his feet exploded.

It was like he’d stepped on a land mine. The blast flung his body into the air. He spun around like a bamboo-copter, then fell to the ground, barely managing a clumsy landing. The asphalt had scraped his arm, and that hurt, but there was something more important. *Why? Why isn’t she coming at me with the same*

attack she used on Tsuchimikado?! It wasn't a relief—he was confused now, unable to read his opponent. If she had something up her sleeve that could finish him off, no questions asked, then what was the point in passing it over?

Then, Oriana, who should have been in absolute control, jumped backward again to lengthen the distance between them. After looking at Kamijou's bewildered expression, she smiled a little.

"Mm. I'm not into using the same spell over and over again."

The look on her face indicated that confession was proof of how relaxed she was.

"The five elements are the most basic of the basics when it comes to modern Western sorcery. Like alchemy, it's nothing but foreplay—anyone can learn it if they study nature. It's easy to control and easy to apply, but it makes your attacks obvious and your defensive spells easier to figure out. I'd be anxious going straight for the climax—it could turn out to be boring! That's why I make sure I have all kinds of cards in my hand, so I don't get bored. And also why I have to toss away these disposable *grimoires* after using them, like a daily calendar. ♪"

Kamijou ignored what she was saying and tried to swiftly close the distance. She simply stood there with a flash card in her mouth. A moment later, there was a sudden gust at his back. It applied too much extra forward momentum to his body; his legs got tangled and he started to fall over. Then Oriana, who had actually come toward him, delivered a brutal uppercut to his chin by lifting the giant signboard under her right arm straight into him.

There was a loud *thud!!*

Kamijou, who had been about to fall forward, ended up bent over backward instead from the impact. Then, adjusting the position of the signboard, Oriana drove its corner into the center of his gut like a horn.

With a dull noise, his bent-over body crashed back into the ground. "Guh… Agh…!!"

His brain and lungs now both prevented from working, he lost track of which way was up and which was down. As it felt like the cardinal directions were

dancing around him, he still managed to get one hand on the ground to try and push himself up.

“Mm.” Then Oriana bit off another flash-card page. “How…*lewd*. This was only foreplay. Have I already brought you to your knees?” She activated some kind of force, and then some kind of hot steam exploded underneath him, between the road and his back. He found himself flung into the air again, but this time he couldn’t take the fall and ended up tumbling down the street.

He summoned every last bit of his consciousness, which was about to cease, then tried desperately to get a handle on what was going on. “Ugh…” But even that attempt was nearly torn to shreds by the pain. The intense pain was bursting through his body. He clenched his teeth and spoke desperately. “God… damn it…How?” That was the question he thought of. “…You said you wouldn’t use the same spell twice, but how do you have so many combinations…?” He didn’t know what the four elements—or was it five?—were, but the important part was the combination of the color and the name. Firing off one spell after another like this should have made her run out of combinations already.

“Hee-hee. Those aren’t the only things I’m combining. If you take a nice, *long* look at me, you’ll figure it out!” Oriana brought up her left hand and put her flash-card ring in her mouth.

“!” Kamijou flinched, trying to prepare himself, but his body wasn’t getting enough energy. Despite his defenseless state, Oriana didn’t attack him—instead she ran her tongue along the flash card. She licked the rectangular paper down the short vertical side first, then across the long horizontal edge.

Kamijou stared at her, dumbfounded, but eventually found words. “*…The angle?* You mean the angle when you…lick it is important?”

“Mm-hmm. That’s one of the factors. It’s a fundamental of Western astrology. *Coniunctio*, *oppositio*, *quartus*, *trinus*, *sextus*, *parallel*—among other aspects. The theory goes that the positional relationship between constellations and planets has a different role based on their angles. I suppose you’d need to take a course to learn how stars, colors, and elements are related, too, wouldn’t you?”

She smirked.

“Of course, *my* spells incorporate mystic number dismantling based on the

page number, too, so strictly speaking, I *can't* use the same spell twice. The past is gone and cannot be repeated—in the same way, a page I've already flipped will never come back."

She ran the slightly wet corner of the flash card—the page—along her upper lip. "That's my limit. Even when I tried my hardest to write grimoires, the original copies *wouldn't stabilize*. They kept going *berserk*, self-destructing, over and over. *And the sentences in them were too messy, too dirty for anyone to read.* My skills, both from a sorcerer's viewpoint and a wizard's, are halfhearted at best."

She narrowed her eyes slightly.

"But I never gave up constantly writing them, constantly creating new spells. I knew it, too: The halfhearted grimoires I wrote would last only an hour at best, and they could self-destruct in a matter of seconds at worst. I know that if I stop and compromise, I'll lose—which is why I'll aim higher and higher forever…I'll never lose my initial enthusiasm."

Finished, she bit the side of the moist card. She didn't tear it out, though. With it sitting on her tongue, she continued to speak, her voice muffled and her mouth not moving much. "Next up is Blade Crater—a grimoire with the wind symbol written in red, its angle a *coniunctio* at exactly zero degrees, and its total page number being five hundred and seventy-seven. I figured I'd tell you beforehand."

Then she paused for a moment.

"If you move from there, you'll die," she said succinctly.

"And if you don't move, my next play *will* end with your submission. You're not a child—you can at least decide for yourself which it will be."

—Oriana held the card in her mouth, drawing it to the side. It tore off the metal ring with the rest of the flash cards on it, an invisible pen writing the words *Wind Symbol* in red ink.

…Kamijou tried to put a hand on the ground and push himself up. His balance was shaken, so his body didn't listen for a moment. Getting to one knee was the extent of his ability. He was thankful nobody was around here. If someone saw

them, it would be a huge mess no matter what.

Don't move…?

——As he remembered Oriana's words, something came running through the ground. A circle about two meters across appeared around her, followed by countless tree branch–like designs growing out of the circle's edge. It looked like the capillaries in a bloodshot eyeball. They spread past Kamijou's position and slipped under the bikes, signs, and cars on the street, stopping a few inches away from the unconscious Tsuchimikado.

If I move, I'll die.

——*Vrrr.* The patterns on the ground began to emit a queer noise as though they were vibrating. Kamijou's weak heart pleaded with him to surrender. He couldn't hope to guess what Oriana's next attack would actually be. Which meant he couldn't find a way past it. She had said something else, too. Her next hit was strong enough to stop his heart if he took it defenselessly.

If I don't move, her next play will be checkmate.

The thing distinguishing the two options was that the latter meant she would end things without killing him. He'd probably be made to faint like Tsuchimikado had, but that was all. Oriana would just run away again, and then Stiyl would probably pursue her. Kamijou going down now wouldn't immediately end everything. Nobody would blame an amateur for going to sleep. Even Tsuchimikado, a professional, had succumbed to it. It would be wrong to tell him to do any more work.

So…so what…What does that matter…?

Nevertheless, Kamijou clenched his right hand into a fist. He clenched it tightly, dug in his nails, put strength into it, filled it with enough willpower to make everything from his wrist down a single object. He reissued the commands to his weak legs and put his feet under him again. Emotions swirled and mixed within him—terror, and the desire to fight that terror—as he thought, *She asked me… Fukiyose asked me if I didn't want to make the Daihasei Festival a success. Are you going to ignore everything she said, you coward?!*

He ground his teeth and reaffirmed his feelings. *I don't care if I'm up against a*

pro sorcerer. I don't care how important this deal is! She decided to join the festival committee, put in sweat and tears to prepare for it, and now all that effort's about to go to waste! And you want to just let that happen?! You know you won't be happy with that, Touma Kamijou!!

"Whoaa…Ooooooohhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

He shouted and sprang into a dash. His balance was still unsteady, and he ran like an airline passenger with motion sickness from turbulence. But he still went forward.

At the same time, Oriana Thomson spat the card in her mouth to her side…

…and a moment later, she fully activated the spell.

4

Blade Crater. The giant pattern spread out on the ground around her in all directions, like a brick wall, like the capillaries in a bloodshot eye, powered on. A moment later, a vacuum blade began its devastation. The countless lines drawn on the road shot straight up like a reverse guillotine, the shutter of the blade rising swiftly. Two hundred and eight slashing attacks. This world of blades, expanded into a spiderweb design, would indiscriminately cleave every object placed within it.

…! This…fool!!

Oriana Thomson's teeth ground a little. They may have looked random, but she'd actually set up the jets of the vacuum blades specifically so they would avoid Kamijou's position. He'd ignored that and advanced on her.

Her original plan had been to surround him in a curtain of vacuum blades coming out of the ground to ensure she could knock him out after he couldn't move. It was for the same reason she hadn't killed Tsuchimikado—she'd decided reckless slaughter would obstruct her from doing her "job."

As Kamijou stepped forward, the spell activated. The vacuum blade guillotines that burst out of the ground instead isolated the now-empty safe zone. There were 208 of them, and they carved everything directly over the pattern into shreds—signs and bicycles alike. Kamijou, having excluded himself from that safe

zone, dove into the vortex of blades. There was no future waiting for him other than amputation, fresh blood, and death.

However…

“!!”

Kamijou’s body didn’t get cut.

The vacuum blades burst straight out of the numerous slashing attack “jets” drawn on the ground, 208 guillotines ripping apart all the air around them—but not one of those hits landed on *him*. He had plunged right into a spot where they were less dense. The place he stepped into was, essentially, a second safe spot besides the one Oriana had set up. She couldn’t see whether it had been a coincidence or if he had somehow found the spot, but…

Then how about this!! Oriana used the spell she had waiting. Whether or not she had consciously done it, anywhere that wasn’t covered by the vacuum guillotines *was an isolation zone already surrounded by the blade shutters*. He had jumped out of the beehive and back in through a different hole. He couldn’t escape.

But even as Oriana thought that, *she was proven wrong again*.

“Orrahhh!!”

Kamijou howled, shoving his right fist into the vacuum blade in front of him. The act was reckless—was he *asking* for his arm to be cut up like a cucumber? But instead, the blade was the one to shatter. And not just the one in front of him—it was every single one surrounding Oriana.

A loud *crunch* came out a moment later. By that time, Kamijou had already stepped closer to Oriana. Only about three steps left. He’d be on top of her after that. *What did he…?! How is his right hand doing this…?!* She couldn’t process the situation presented to her. For now, she concentrated on defeating the enemy. She ripped off another flash card with her teeth, the act recording a command written in yellow lettering.

The one-time-use spell’s name was Drop Rest. It had the appearance of a compressed-air spear, but it would effectively turn by force the consciousness of whomever it hit from the external world to the internal world. The attack didn’t

cause pain—it made them only pass out. Oriana had wanted to surround Kamijou with the vacuum blades and then send this spear straight through both the blades in the way *and* him, but things had taken an unexpected turn.

But even with the betrayal of her expectations, Oriana fired it without a second thought. “Take thi—!!”

Before she even finished shouting, Kamijou punched away the tip of the Drop Rest spear. The wind lance shattered and scattered meaninglessly around them until disappearing into the air. *But…why…?!* Oriana’s surprise caused him to take another step. Two steps left. She was confused. The situation was inexplicable. Her enemy was right there, and she had forgotten to deal with him. *How is he countering this?! His right hand may be special…but this nobody is reading my every move! There…There must be something he’s using to make these decisions! It’s…*

Another step. One left.

Then, like a bolt of lightning, the answer hit Oriana. *I see.* ***I’m not using the same spell more than once!*** *Once I’ve attacked a place, I can’t use the same attack from the same direction again! He’s using that to predict it…!!*

Oriana Thomson never used the same spell twice. If a location was attacked once, it would not be attacked again. Of course, she could use a flame sword to attack a point, then fire an ice bullet at it. But that was because swords and bullets had different attack ranges—and that difference was a hole to be exploited. Kamijou was moving at her along the points where he’d been attacked in the past. If the same attack wouldn’t come at him twice, he would need to worry about only the rest—whatever she attacked him with *after* that. And dealing with it at that point was easy. It was like she’d told him her next attack would be a feint or that there was sure to be a loophole somewhere.

Hah. I put my hand together to remove any blind spots—to think that would hint at how to fight against it! Ha-ha, boy, you’re wonderful! I do love men with original ideas!!

A moment later, each was in range of the other. Oriana had no time to use her flash cards. Instead, she brought the “signboard” under her right arm down on Kamijou, aiming for the crown of his head.

However…

Touma Kamijou twisted around. He pivoted on one foot without letting his axis of rotation bend; his body pretty much turned to the side. A soft *ksshhh* sound scraped right by the tip of his nose, but that was all. The corner of the "signboard" went right past the sideways boy and slammed into the asphalt.

…!! Oriana Thomson was speechless as she looked back in front of her.

At the same time, from point-blank range, he fired off a right straight.

"Whoaa…" Kamijou expelled all the air from his lungs and roared. "… Ooooooooooaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!"

Putting all his body weight and speed into his fist, he punched her right in the middle of her face. The recoil from the impact shot traveled back up his wrist, up to his elbow, and to his shoulder.

Brrrrkkkk!!

With a magnificently explosive sound, Oriana's body went flying away. Taking every bit of kinetic energy from Kamijou's initial dash, she fell to the ground and tumbled head over feet down the road.

With a whistling of wind, the signboard she'd let go of landed right next to him. He felt a slight numbness in his right fingers. *Did I get her…? Does this mean the deal for the Stab Sword magic item is done for?* For now, the thing Oriana had been carrying was next to him. He was still worried about Tsuchimikado, still unconscious, and the other party involved in the deal, who had also infiltrated Academy City. Had he escaped the worst of it for the time being?

"Heh."

Then, as he stood there thinking, the wind carried a laugh to his ears. His eyes shot back to where they'd been looking before.

"Hee-hee. You're so rough with me. Look, my button came undone."

Oriana was lying faceup on the road, and as though she'd just woken from an afternoon nap, she slowly sat up. With her now-empty right hand, she was holding the fabric of her work uniform down at the chest—it was almost open. *It…didn't work?!*

Kamijou was dumbfounded, but Oriana didn't seem to mind it very much. "Weeell, I'm not the muscular, buff type of lady, you know. You didn't come at me straight; there was a slight angle. Your body's been getting damaged, and you were about to lose your balance. I suppose that's why the impact wasn't perfect. Yes, to put it quite frankly…" She paused. "Your fist did a very good job. I, however, am *used to others seeing through my attacks and countering them*. I'm finding that I still don't feel completely satisfied." She brought the ring of flash cards in her left hand to her mouth.

Kamijou assumed a defensive posture, but that was when his scrapes all started to hurt at once. The simultaneity caused him to pause momentarily. "!!"

Oriana watched his face pucker up at the pain and bit off a page of the flash cards, looking entertained. Contrary to Kamijou's expectations, however, it wasn't an attack. He felt a wind blowing from near her, and in the next moment, a miniature tornado cast her body into the air. Within less than a second, she slipped between the slight crevice between the shopping arcade roof and the tightly packed buildings, then landed on top of one of them.

Despite the signboard she dropped, lying at Kamijou's feet. Despite how important the Stab Sword was supposed to be for the deal. As she stood on the edge of the rooftop with her back turned, she bit off another page of her flash-card ring and said, "I'll let you have that for now. Don't think we're finished with our little game, though. Now's where things start to get *really* hot."

Oriana's voice was soft—was she manipulating the sonic conductivity of the air? It rang clearly in Kamijou's ears. He looked between the Stab Sword on the ground and her on the roof. "…Why?" he asked. His voice was soft as well, but it seemed to get to her.

"Why what?"

"The Stab Sword's right here. It's not like I'm in control here. Why would you just withdraw now…?"

Oriana giggled a little. "Why indeed? Give it some thought—it could be fun." She bounded toward the middle of the rooftop, putting herself out of sight of Kamijou, who was looking up at it. She disappeared entirely from the tiny slit between the arcade roof and the building walls.

“Wait! What about the spell you put on Tsuchimikado?!” he immediately shouted despite being unable to see her anymore. The arcade roof blocked out the sky completely. She might have gone inside a building, or she might be jumping across buildings.

Still, a voice without form reached him. “The spell lasts twenty minutes. It’ll turn off on its own, my little worrywart esper. ♪”

Kamijou looked around, but neither Oriana nor her voice was anywhere to be found.

5

Motoharu Tsuchimikado apparently wouldn’t wake up for a little while. Kamijou wavered, wondering whether he should keep following Oriana, but ended up staying put. He couldn’t leave Tsuchimikado here, and the Stab Sword was here, too, disguised as a giant signboard. Carrying it would slow him down, and if Oriana counterattacked and stole it, they’d be right back where they started. So he decided to give Stiyl a call.

Unfortunately, Kamijou didn’t know Stiyl’s phone number. Guiltily, he decided to borrow Tsuchimikado’s phone and took it out of his pocket. He went through his history and pressed the call button.

Stiyl’s opinion was crystal clear. “All right. Destroy the Stab Sword. Your right hand should have no problem. That will completely ruin Lidvia Lorenzetti’s plan for the deal. I don’t know much about the police force in Academy City, but if the whole bus is on fire, it might have been reported. You should destroy the thing and get out of there before anyone rushes to the scene.”

“Is it really okay to just break it? They won’t get angry and start attacking the city, right?”

“If they did that, *they’d* be the ones to get surrounded. This is Academy City—dead center of enemy territory, from the sorcery faction’s point of view. If Lidvia planned out the deal calmly, then she would certainly leave calmly, too. They know that quarreling with the other party in this deal would best be done once they were all safe. This village is far too dangerous for sorcerers.”

That interpretation—that Academy City was a dangerous place—didn't quite make sense to Kamijou, who actually lived there. Still, an expert in the field said so. He decided to follow what Stiyl was saying. "All right. I'll deal with the Stab Sword with my right hand."

"Hurry. I'll ask the higher-ups what to do from here," said Stiyl, hanging up.

"No 'please' or anything, huh?" Kamijou ended the call and returned the phone to his friend's pocket. He could tell Tsuchimikado was still exhausted. Kamijou felt a chill at how Tsuchimikado didn't react at all, but he could hear rhythmic breathing, like his friend was sleeping, if he listened closely. Tsuchimikado's life didn't seem to be in danger at the moment.

"All right. Anyway," Kamijou said to himself, turning back to the signboard on the ground. It was large and rectangular and wrapped in a white cloth. They'd probably filled in the remaining height and width with something else to keep the Stab Sword looking rectangular. You could wrap it in cloth all you wanted; if the sword's shape stuck out, everyone would pay attention to it. He knew using the Imagine Breaker's power would destroy the sword. First he decided to unwrap the cloth. He needed to have visual confirmation that he had destroyed what was inside.

"Urgh…! What is this? It's really…hard." It was camouflaged as professional packing, so the white cloth was wrapped very tightly around it. The knots looked complex and technical; he couldn't begin to imagine how to undo them. It wasn't made out of string, either, so he also couldn't rip it apart with his hands. With no other option, he tugged on the fabric. After a little while, he could feel the wrapping start to loosen. Once the one part got loose, the entire white cloth lost its firmness. He began to peel off layer after layer. Whatever was inside, it was coming more and more into view with each removed layer.

Now that I think of it, what does the Stab Sword even look like? he asked himself, removing the rest of the cloth. Inside, the Stab Sword—

It wasn't there.

"Huh?"

His hands froze after undoing the white cloth.

The bandages were all off the mummy, and what was inside? A plain, long, slender signboard. A homemade one, like the kinds students would make and put up, its thin metal surface painted. This was probably for a student-run stall that would be open only for the Daihasei Festival. It read Ice Cream Store in cute, rounded letters.

But…"What…what's this?" Did this mean the signboard hadn't been a disguise at all? Carrying in the Stab Sword without a disguise would have stood out too much in Academy City. Still, it would be difficult to fit something its size in a bag. That's why Oriana dressed up as a painting worker, disguised the sword as a sign, and wrapped it in white cloth. That was a plan she contrived so she wouldn't seem suspicious…wasn't it?

But if she was really just carrying a sign anyway…then all their assumptions were wrong.

Where was the Stab Sword?

Why did Oriana show up, then run away?

The most basic premise Stiyl Magnus and Motoharu Tsuchimikado had been talking about—was it even *right*?

And in the first place…

Were they even trying to make a deal for the Stab Sword at all?

"What's going on here…?" Kamijou murmured in blank amazement. No one was around to give him the answer he wanted. Motoharu Tsuchimikado, a professional sorcerer, was still out cold. Oriana Thomson, who had set this up, was nowhere near here. Still, he said it again, in almost the same words.

"What the hell is going on here…?!"

INTERLUDE THREE

1

Oriana Thomson had been walking through the city. Now she was in a luggage center set up temporarily near a big-name department store. The unmanned coin lockers in the city were out of service, perhaps due to fear of terrorist bombings or the like. Instead, they were offering a service not unlike that of a hotel, where you could check your luggage and give it to an actual person.

Oriana handed a plastic number ticket to the clerk behind the counter. The young female clerk looked like she was wondering why a painter would be using a luggage check-in service. Oriana smiled and told her she'd had to leave her valuables here—otherwise her wallet would have gotten covered in paint. The clerk seemed to understand that. Oriana took a handbag from her and left the luggage center.

Inside was not a wallet—it was a change of clothes.

Without her signboard, Oriana's painter's clothing stood out as odd. They were working clothes. If she took a lazy stroll around the city, she'd appear unnatural. On top of that, her second uniform button had come off in the earlier battle. She had the first and third ones buttoned, but she had a big chest to begin with, so you could see her skin through the crack.

…I used a lot of different spells. I swear…I wanted to save plenty of them for later, too. Oriana had a generous, myriad array of spells, but the fact that she couldn't use any of them more than once restricted her. She was always thinking ahead whenever she fought, always maintaining a healthy degree of stinginess. This time, though, she had used important ones—two during the battle and two

during her flight. That had been unexpected. They were incredibly effective and made to her satisfaction, so never being able to use them again made her feel a pang of loneliness. *That's just how strong my enemies were, I suppose. Well, anyhow, I should rethink my options after I change.*

Oriana walked around, wondering where she should change her clothes. Her painter look still stood out a bit when she went inside buildings. *I guess wherever is fine*, she concluded offhandedly, entering a side road away from the flow of traffic. She wandered farther down, and when she got someplace where nobody was around, she dropped the handbag to the ground. She actually seemed to intend to change right there.

Thinking she should get in a report while she changed, Oriana tore off a flash-card page with her mouth. She put a piece of tape on it and stuck it to the wall of the alley. The filthy wall suddenly lit up with horizontal orange letters. They were simultaneously translating and displaying the voice of her superior, Lidvia Lorenzetti, on the wall.

Is this report urgent? I must say, using a different method of communication every single time makes it harder on me.

"Hee-hee. This is my policy, you know. I don't really want to break it." Oriana's voice would be transcribed into letters and displayed to Lidvia, too. As she spoke, she unbuttoned the front of her work uniform. With just that, the clothing bounced open like a spring. It didn't fit her bust size in the first place. "In any case, I just wanted to report that the first phase has ended. A lot happened along the way, but I met all the necessary checkpoints, so I'd say there's no need to worry! I walked around like a tourist, too." Upon her release from the tight, restricting clothes, she gave a slight sigh of relief. Then, without hesitation, she threw off her shirt. She wasn't wearing underwear, so she was already finished undressing her upper body.

The old sentence vanished, a new line of characters flowing from left to right. "What might you mean by *a lot happened*?"

"Hmm? Well…there was a lot. A boy punched me in the face, broke my button, and he almost saw my boobs. That's about it. Actually, maybe he really did see them."

Another sentence. “…I may be a nun dedicated to poverty, chastity, and obedience, but you seem quite inattentive and indifferent.” This spell guarded against translation mistakes by reading both the person’s words and thoughts simultaneously; occasionally it translated the silence, as well.

“Oh, was that an insult? In the Old Testament, Adam and Eve wandered the earth with just a leaf on their completely naked bodies, didn’t they? The thrill of exhibitionism on a world scale—compared to that, I don’t believe this was any big deal.”

“…”

Oriana put her hands on her pants, then realized she wasn’t getting a response. The wall displayed an extended period of quiet, and as it continued, she felt a trickle of sweat on her cheek. “Wait…what? Hello? Hello…? Oh, don’t sulk like that! I promise I won’t make fun of the Bible anymore, so don’t cry.”

The displayed silence disappeared and an unusually short sentence came back. “I was doing nothing of the sort. What about your wounds?”

“Oh, they aren’t much,” she said, taking off her shoes, loosening her belt, unzipping, and placing her hands on the waist of her pants, which already showed a little of her bottom. “Well…perhaps not? My cheek doesn’t feel swollen, but I do feel a little like I’ve been penetrated to my core…” She suddenly wavered to the side. She shook her head to wake herself back up, then took off her pants with both hands. She wore underwear, of course. Once she pulled each foot through a pants leg, she felt her balance swaying again.

“Any threat to the plan?”

“No, I don’t think so. Actually, I know so. You can leave everything to me.” Lidvia couldn’t see her, but Oriana forced a smile when she answered. She bent over, completely naked save for one piece of underwear, unzipped the bag at her feet, and rummaged around for her change of clothes. Her movements were oddly flexible; she could place both palms on the ground without bending her legs. “Hmm-hmm. I’ll be using my battle clothes now! If I do it right, though, getting rid of this working lady’s impression will make my job easier.”

Which one should I choose? thought Oriana, fishing around in the handbag. The fabrics inside the open zipper were all gaudy pieces of clothing.

Lidvia came back with a confused sentence. “You’re changing?”

“I told you. Without that button, you could almost see my boobs—actually, you could definitely see them. I didn’t think it would be good to go on with broken clothes.”

“…And why, again, are you so inattentive and indifferent?”

Again with the attitude, thought Oriana, not bothering to respond to that. She removed a few candidate pieces of clothing from the bag. “Also, I forgot to pick up the sign when I ran away. I thought an empty-handed worker would look out of place.”

“…Does that mean…?”

“Yep, that’s right! They picked up the sign.”

“…How…?”

“They probably already know what’s inside—and that I was running around with a dummy.”

“…”

“Hm? What? Oh, it’ll be fine. Just because they know about the Stab Sword doesn’t mean the deal is going to be affected. One lost point won’t lose the game. And real battles aren’t like games. You can claw out a victory if you use the lost point to your benefit.” In just one piece of underwear, she took her shirt and pressed it to her chest, going through all the different combinations and levels of exposure. “I’ll do my job. I won’t let anyone interfere with this deal, and they can’t interfere anyway. Especially not if this deal will make all the parties involved happy.”

That last part—she spoke it looking into the sky.

The sky above Academy City was clear, blue, and almost criminally peaceful, with occasional blank fireworks popping across it.

2

“They got us.”

After finishing her conversation with Aleister—the top of Academy City—and

relaying orders to many departments, the English Puritan archbishop Laura Stuart sighed. A few hours had already passed in that time. In Japan it would be afternoon, but England was nearly nine hours off. Only a deep darkness, silence, and a chill creeping along the floor were in the air here at St. George's Cathedral.

A woman sat in a chair in front of a pulpit; she had golden locks twice as long as she was tall. Sighing, she brought her hands behind her head, then grabbed the roots of her ridiculously long hair and flicked them like a fishing pole. The ends of her hair rippled in large waves, flowing like a snake, before she grabbed them. She used one hand to attach a silver barrette to her hair, holding it in place. In a matter of moments her hairstyle had gone back to its normal two-fold shape.

People got used to sequences of actions. It may seem sloppy when put that way, but it exuded a refined beauty. Especially the golden undulations glowing in the moonlight—it had transformed into a veritable light show, able to grant pleasure even from looking at it. Paul, one of the twelve apostles, had once forbidden women to have long hair, and he strongly encouraged sisters to cut it short or nestle it inside a hat. The reason was that long hair could tempt men and cause them to fall from grace. The logic would sound absurd in modern times…but her hair was lustrous, radiant enough to make one think it wasn't so ridiculous.

"Is that which is written in this truth?" Laura asked, scooping up the papers on her lap and waving them. There were about twenty pages, containing a report from the British Museum regarding the Stab Sword. The motion was careless, but there was a clear emotion in it. The emotion's name was anger, and its temperature: ice-cold.

A few moments after her muttered words, there came an answer. It was a middle-aged man's voice. "I am sorry. You have left its administration to us for many years, yet we did not realize until just today that it was a mistaken exhibit…"

"It matters not. Thou need not show fear, for I don't mind it. My emotions are not aimed in your direction. In fact, allow me to thank you for coming at such an hour."

Farther in the darkened cathedral, near the entrance, Laura sensed the man feeling small, as though obliged. Perhaps, like her, he was implying by the way he stood that basking in the same moonlight as her was awe-inspiring in and of itself.

The man was Charles Conder. He was at once an influential archaeologist and a preserver belonging to the British Museum. Unlike the investigators who romped about the world gathering at museums, he was entrusted with the supervision and repair of items inside those museums. Being a part of a division that strove to allow three-thousand-year-old-plus articles with rich histories to survive for the next millennium meant you needed to have world-class talent: both the mind of a scholar and the skills of an artist. Charles was approaching his late thirties, but others still saw him as a talented newcomer in this industry. He may have had the ability, but his experience was not yet acknowledged.

No shortage of articles they handled were magical items…but the British Museum's actual staff were no more than civilians with no connection to sorcery. Even the museum director was no exception. The English Puritan Church was asked for opinions on how to handle the display items from a theological, religious, and moral point of view, and so it had indirect control over them. The British Museum itself was incredibly famous throughout the world, yet it still hired from the general populace. It was a preventative measure; if the Church were to place a clearly suspicious occult division in their ranks, the truth behind magic would spread throughout the world in a heartbeat.

Charles didn't know that the English Puritan Church was conspiring secretly with magic, either. The report detailing his investigation said nothing about the item in question being in any way magical. The man didn't have such respect for Laura because of the threat of her substantial magical power, but simply out of piety.

"Now, Conder, if we might proceed down to our business, there is a thing I would ask you regarding…"

"Yes, Archbishop?" came the answer from the dark. It wasn't immediate—it was delivered after a silent beat. It was the sort of superb timing only those with an accurate read on the mood were capable of.

“Mm.” Laura stared into the darkness before her, satisfied. “…Conder, you would not happenstance to be laughing to thyself at how I speak, yes?”

“I’m sorry?”

“That isn’t the reason you have thus hidden yourself within the dark like this?”

“N-no, I would never…”

“Then I must wondereth why thine voice is shaking, you simpleton! I swear—everyone and their mother berates me for my way of speaking! When, in fact, every bit of the mistakes is due to the one who taught me, Motoharu Tsuchimikado…”

“Archbishop, I often hear rumors regarding your lack of control over the Japanese language.”

“And so it is already passed throughout all of London?!”

“Please, I beg you to calm down. We are speaking English right now. However poor your Japanese language skills may be, it has nothing to do with our current conversation.”

“…” Laura cleared her throat. Charles Conder was trying to make the save of his life, but from her point of view, there was a slight severity to it—why was that? “Well…May I be broaching the main topic?”

“Of course, Archbishop.”

She collected herself and asked to proceed—Charles followed suit without skipping a beat.

“As I mentioned in the report, the item in our museum’s possession is a replica of the Stab Sword. It could be speculated that the original never existed. This is something reported from time to time in archaeological fields, but this seems to be a case of *intersection of legends*.”

“Intersection?” asked Laura slowly. The viewpoints of the British Museum’s archaeology were a valuable source of information—they weren’t coming from the English Puritan Church, which was completely committed to the occult.

“Yes, Archbishop. Have you ever seen a report like that? Yes, for example…the Nazca geoglyphs or the Mo’ai heads on Easter Island. In our own nation,

Stonehenge would apply as well. All throughout history we discover objects whose purpose for creation is unknown." Charles bowed deeply in the darkness. "This may sound very odd, but the reasons for their creation are then *retroactively created by others*. Essentially, traditions and legends with insufficient grounds multiply and snowball. I believe the likenesses of the Holy Mother may be the easiest analogy."

"Hmm," said Laura. Portraits of Mary were the representational "miracle item" in the veneration of Mary (which was substantially popular despite notices by the monotheistic Crossist Church to refrain from such acts). In the beginning, the legend was only that her portrait shed tears, but as time went by, all sorts of new anecdotal "legends" spread wildly, such as wounds healing upon touching it or evil spirits disappearing just by holding it up. It was beyond the scope of just Idol Theory, and regardless of its problems when it came to their faith, these stories were difficult to take as historical fact.

"So thou meanest this. There was once an outlandish sword constructed of marble in Rome. However, the Roman Orthodox Church couldst not verify who made it and why. Instead, they began to make up their own self-centered reasons. Rumors spread, and left their marks in legend and literature."

"Yes, Archbishop. If you will allow me to report from an archaeologist's point of view, however, I believe this may not have been an act of intentional malice. Other examples aside from the Stab Sword exist throughout the world, so I question the validity of blaming the Roman Orthodox Church one-sidedly."

Charles's statement was understandable. The entire Crossist Church was analogous in the first place. The Bible was created when the Son of God's disciples wrote down what He preached. Opinions then differed on how best to interpret the Bible, eventually culminating in the development of many religions, each in the understanding of the particular nation's traditions and peoples. That led to the current state of the Crossist world. Catholicism, Protestantism, English Puritanism, Roman Orthodoxy, Russian Catholicism—all took the Bible as center to their faith. Despite languages differing among countries, there was no Bible whose contents were rearranged according to English Puritan principles, for example. Nevertheless, myriad ways of thinking sprang forth and the faith began to fracture.

Historically speaking, this sort of situation wasn't unusual…*But perhaps the Roman Orthodox Church is intentionally using the legends of the Stab Sword to hide another truth. No, no—I suppose that is in the realm of simple fantasy.* Laura shook her head. Whatever the case was, she now knew one thing for sure: The "Stab Sword" Soul Arm was a fictional story born of legends and never existed in the first place. She didn't know what the marble sword had been created for, but either way, it didn't have the ridiculous effect of causing certain death for all saints simply by aiming its tip at them.

That would mean this deal about to proceed in Academy City was far less important. Laura's shoulders drooped. She felt deflated. "So then, have you grasped the original legend of the so-worrisome marble blade?"

"Yes, Archbishop. Because of the snowballing intersection of legends, we don't have clear proof, but we believe this record to be the truth."

"Oh?" Laura cocked her head. This information was not in the documents. Initially, she thought offhandedly that the viewpoint of these "normal" archaeologists was fairly important, but…

"The item in our possession is not a sword in the first place."

"What?" Laura frowned. She could see in the darkness the British Museum preserver holding up the replica Stab Sword. The white marble stood out strangely in the darkness. *He turned it upside down.*

"It's a cross. It appears to be an item natively called the *Croce di Pietro*."

"Pe…?!" Laura Stuart almost stopped breathing. "The Cross of Peter?!"

"Pietro" was one of the twelve apostles and the Italian name of Peter. Even those unfamiliar with Crossism would have at least heard the *name* of St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. It was the giant church at the very heart—literally and figuratively—of the world's largest religion, Roman Orthodoxy. Not only was the Cross of Peter one of the ten strongest Soul Arms in all of Crossism, it was also deeply related to the history of the entire region of Rome and the Vatican. The Stab Sword could send all saints to their graves regardless of distance and obstruction with a single attack, but the Cross of Peter was so dangerous it paled in comparison.

The British Museum's preserver must have seemed mystified by the archbishop's sudden cry. It was only natural—Charles was just an authority of archaeology and had no knowledge of magic. He obviously wouldn't understand just how much destructive power was behind that name he spoke.

Laura, however, was different. She was well acquainted with the worlds of sorcery and Crossism, and that's exactly why she knew how serious the situation was. All thought of Charles was out of her mind, replaced by this new information.

That is bad. If he is correct, the meaning of the word deal *is fundamentally not the same. If they are indeed honestly attempting to carry out the "deal" with the Croce di Pietro in Academy City…*

The Croce di Pietro…Despite its existing from a historical standpoint, the Roman Orthodox Church had never once allowed it to be public. It was truly a legendary Soul Arm—the biggest in history that wasn't directly related to the Son of God. If the documents regarding its effects held true…

…then at the end of the "deal," Academy City will crumble. No, ***mayhap even more than that***, she said to herself, swallowing.

And yet on her face was a magnificent smile…

…as she thought about how best to overcome this dizzying situation and use it to her own advantage.

3

"The Croce di Pietro…or the Cross of Peter, in our language," said Stiyl Magnus suddenly after receiving a report on his cell phone. "Heavens forbid. This is a mess."

They were sitting in an open café only a short distance from the automatic bus repair yard. Around ten tables were here, each with a parasol over it, and they had taken their seats at one. Touma Kamijou and Motoharu Tsuchimikado, finally recovered from Oriana's fainting spell, filled the other chairs. There was nothing on the table. They weren't waiting for their order or anything—nobody was really feeling like eating or drinking anything.

“Hey, what’s the Cross of Peter? Does that mean a cross made out of a mysterious metal called Peter?”

“Peter is a person’s name, fool. He was one of the twelve apostles, said to have been entrusted with the keys to Heaven from the Lord. That fable isn’t what’s important here—it’s a different legend.”

“A different one?” pressed Kamijou.

Tsuchimikado replied, still a little worn out. “Peter, he’s a real big shot…He owns the Papal States of the Vatican. Actually, strictly speaking, the Papal States were built on top of the vast lands where his remains are, nya.”

“The Vatican…You mean that place they always say is the smallest country in the world?” Kamijou looked at him in confusion.

Stiyl blew out cigarette smoke, annoyed. “The name *Vatican City State* was decided by the Lateran Treaty in 1929. Until then, the region was called the Papal States of Rome. Also, it wasn’t small to begin with. Its size has changed a lot throughout history, but at the height of its power, it covered forty-seven thousand square kilometers in central Italy around Rome. Italy was in a period of internal strife, like the Warring States period, so the Vatican steadily lost territory as the nation was unified, that’s all.”

“Anyway, the problem is how the Roman Papal States were founded in the first place. Specifically what the Roman Orthodox Church did at first to the vast lands where Peter’s remains are.”

“Huh?” grunted Kamijou stupidly. He figured to himself that everyone got together and cultivated the wastelands.

“They built a grave—by burying Peter’s body and planting a cross there.”

Kamijou was startled. That meant the Cross of Peter was the cross used to mark Peter’s grave. His face paled, but Tsuchimikado continued anyway.

“Peter was laid to rest there, so the Church decided they should do their best to administer the remains so nobody would disturb his sleep. It apparently first began when Emperor Constantine offered and constructed a church right above where he was sleeping, but then the Renaissance came along, things ballooned, and they did a complete renovation. That’s where we got St. Peter’s Basilica,

designed by Michelangelo. It's the largest and most important church in the world—a sanctuary standing atop a dead man."

Peter died in the first century AD, St. Peter's Basilica was completed in the fourth century, and the Frankish king offered the Roman Papal States in the eighth century. Despite the considerable gaps between them, the impetus was still the death of Peter and the moment they built the grave there.

Still, even with the explanation, Kamijou had a hard time getting a grip on things. "Hmm…So, like, it's a building to honor a great man, then?"

"I wonder about that, nya! On the other hand, you could say the Church used the death of a saint to reinforce its authority by building a new church there."

Kamijou felt like that wasn't *quite* protecting the slumber of the dead, but also not quite like making the remains inside the grave into a tourist attraction, either. "That's…I can't say I'd appreciate that. Would the Roman Orthodox Church really go that far?"

"Huh? Oh, that stuff happens everywhere. There was an archbishop named Thomas Becket in England, too. The Royal Family Faction assassinated him in a certain church on December 29, 1170. And that church was the Canterbury Cathedral—basically the head church of English Puritanism."

Tsuchimikado paused for a moment, then smirked. "Until then, it was a cathedral in a place far away from London…but when the important man died, it got promoted right away to *base of operations*. The assassination of the archbishop Becket fanned flames of resentment toward the Royal Family Faction, and as a result, the faction was forced to acknowledge the Church's right to autonomy. Now people even call it the birthplace of English Puritanism. *The place a saint died* has some pretty huge effects, Kammy."

Kamijou didn't really understand much of it, but whatever the case may be, it seemed the value of a church rose just by having important people related to it. "…So Oriana wasn't carrying the Stab Sword, she was carrying the Croce-whatever? Wouldn't that be dangerous? Or does it have some kind of value, like rare artwork or something?"

"Little of column A, little of column B. What we need to worry about, of course, is the former." Stiyl bitterly puffed smoke. "Remember? The Roman

Papal States started when they put up the Croce di Pietro on that vast land—more specifically, that vast space. The opposite applies, too."

"The opposite?" asked Kamijou.

"Yeah. Wherever you put the Croce di Pietro, it's placed completely under the control of the Roman Orthodox Church. Academy City is no exception to that."

"What?!" Kamijou was at a loss.

Tsuchimikado continued in a bitter voice. "There was a quote about the Stab Sword being a 'sword that could pierce even dragons and stitch them into the lands.'"

He stopped breathing for a moment.

"Dragons are giant beings with wings that would commit self-interested massacres to protect their own treasures. In other words, that's referring to angels, the servants of God, and devils, those who have fallen to Hell, nya. Stitching the dragons into the lands could be code for remaking the land into a sanctuary so that they can have angels defend it…Those bastards."

Kamijou gasped. He had a lot of questions he needed to ask, but he couldn't find the right words. "Wait, what?! What do you mean *command*? What exactly are they trying to do here?!"

"The entire inside of the Vatican nation is basically a gigantic church, Kammy. The space inside it is weird. *It warps the balance of fortune and misfortune in such a way that no matter what happens, it will always be for the Roman Orthodox Church's benefit.*"

Kamijou would need more than that explanation to understand.

Stiyl continued for him. "Practically speaking, the Vatican territory is brimming with oriented mana. With it, they make everything go the Roman Orthodox Church's way. It's rather like cheating at a roulette wheel in a casino using magnets. You ignore how the ball is supposed to move, and it will fall into the number you want."

Even with that, Kamijou didn't get it. But he knew it was a spell that made things go someone's way. "So like…Is it like that alchemist? How he made

everything he was thinking into reality?”

There was a man named Aureolus Isard. As a result of mastering alchemy, he devised a spell that would bring anything he was thinking into reality. Because of that, he eventually allowed his own doubts to crush him, but…

“No, it’s not something as understanding of human will as Ars Magna. It purely leads the entire Roman Orthodox Church to what will benefit it, automatically. What do you think would happen if they raised it in Academy City?”

“What would happen? Uhh…” Academy City would advance in a way that was convenient for the Roman Orthodox Church? He had only a vague image of this; he couldn’t envision anything concrete. For now he decided to say what came to mind. “Well…It would make things better for the Roman Orthodox Church, right? Then if a follower of the Church came to Academy City, they’d be really lucky?”

“Well, yeah. If the Croce di Pietro does what the literature on it claims, then it wouldn’t mean only bad things would happen or anything. A Roman Orthodox follower who entered the city could keep getting huge winnings in gambles and somehow never lose, and even if a bomb blew up the building he was in, he’d make it out without a scratch. *To an unnatural extent*, you see. Also…” Stiyl curled his lips sardonically. “The Croce di Pietro would save those not of Roman Orthodoxy as well. If the Roman Orthodox follower kept winning in gambles, other people would lose, right? The Croce di Pietro creates a situation in which *it was a good thing they lost*. It would be the same for the bomb. Even if it wiped out the building, nobody would be fatally wounded. It would create a happy situation where everyone was *happy nobody got hurt*.”

“???” Kamijou looked at him askance. If everything Stiyl said was right, then…“But wouldn’t that mean everyone would be happy? Is there even a problem with that?”

“Yes—a huge one,” he spat. “Listen. If the Croce di Pietro was never set up in the first place, there wouldn’t have been people losing at that gambling, nor would there have been a bomb aiming for the Roman Orthodox follower. It may seem at first like it makes everyone happy, but the cross puts a clear burden on everything around it. In ways that might not be visible, too.”

Tsuchimikado, his upper body now lying on the table in exhaustion, went on. “This kind of happiness **swap-out** comes up kind of a lot even in Crossist history, nya. Take Saint Martin. There’s a pretty funny story about him. There was one time he tried to destroy an ancient heretic shrine and uproot its sacred tree, nya. The heretic peasants didn’t want to be part of dumb old Crossism, so as their last act of resistance, they said this. If God is really protecting you, then we’ll cut down the sacred tree ourselves so it falls on you. If He’s really protecting you, you won’t die.”

Tsuchimikado always acted flashy and superficial, so hearing him talk so easily about these Crossist legends was like seeing another side of him for Kamijou.

“Saint Martin accepted, then made the sign of the cross as the sacred tree fell. And then, wow, it was amazing. The sacred tree suddenly started falling in the other direction, right to where the heretic peasants were waiting, almost hitting them. The peasants were moved—it really was a miracle from his Lord!—and converted to Crossism…but doesn’t that seem strange, nya? Saint Martin’s the one who used a strange power and made the sacred tree fall in their direction instead. I think he could have chosen a safer place to drop it, and why did he have to go and cut down a sacred tree, nya? They’re kind of important, right? And why were they thanking him…?”

“At the moment, the sacred tree had fallen in the opposite direction, but it didn’t kill any of them. That was the charity shown to them by the Lord, and *the peasants, who still had a chance to convert, all became happy*. For better or worse, though, their history, traditions, and mental culture *were* wiped out.”

Kamijou didn’t think that was right. He felt like that was giving happiness, but it didn’t come from something that happened—they were forced to be happy no matter what happened.

Tsuchimikado peeled his face off the table. “This way of doing things is something psychology knows is effective, too, nya. First, you make demand A, which is absolutely impossible to meet. After they beg you and say they can’t do that, you make demand B, which was your original goal. It’s way more likely that people will listen to demand B after that than if you made it at the beginning. Like hey, compared to A, B is a breeze! How nice, right? It’s a specific process that weighs one evil against another, bringing down the relative value of

happiness.”

Stiyl continued, the cigarette in his lips wiggling up and down as he spoke. “The Croce di Pietro uses those psychological effects in its legends. No matter what happens, it ends up being good for the Roman Orthodox Church. Even the people nearby, to whom that very process presented unfair demands, *accept it for some reason*…A *very* comfortable sanctuary for the Church, no?”

The sorcerers’ words settled slowly in Kamijou’s mind. It was all so much bigger than him, but with a little bit of time, he finally started to understand. “Wait, Stiyl. What are they trying to do, exactly, with this whole deal for the Croce di Pietro?”

“If you were to split the world in two, you’d have a science faction and a magic faction. It’s balanced exactly half-and-half right now,” he answered simply. “But Academy City is the leader of that science side, right? If the entire place were to fall under the patronage of the Roman Orthodox Church, what do you think would happen to that world balance?”

“Oh!” Kamijou figured it out. The science side already held half the world’s power. If some organization from the magic side was to control it, the magic side would then have the science side’s power, plus what they already had by themselves. That would add up to more than 50 percent of the world’s power. Afterward, all they’d need would be a majority decision to do whatever they wanted with the world.

And more importantly…If that organization was the Roman Orthodox Church, the largest denomination of Crossism…

“If you were attacked by both the science and magic side, then any organization or agency belonging to only one wouldn’t stand a chance. It would be like being punched in the chest and back at the same time. The world’s power balance would be completely focused into the Roman Orthodox Church.”

The Roman Orthodox Church didn’t need to think about what exactly they needed to do to get Academy City under their control. If they stuck the Croce di Pietro in the city, the city would do everything for the Roman Orthodox Church’s benefit.

And precisely what would happen? Would the Academy City General Board

suddenly go to them and ask to be placed under their protection? Would the region fall into an economic crisis and come under Roman Orthodox rule in a sponsorship? Or would the entire city just be blown to smithereens, with the Church—rather than Japan's government—in charge of reconstruction?

He didn't know what would happen, but no matter what it was, it would always be in the Roman Orthodox Church's favor. At the same time, nobody in Academy City would be suspicious of how it turned out. No matter how unfair the demand and no matter how ridiculous the burden that was placed on them.

They would create a world where everyone experiences only happiness.

"Then this deal Oriana was talking about…"

"Yeah. It's not a trade of Soul Arms like the Stab Sword or the Croce di Pietro. It's a deal to gain control of Academy City and the world—because they would be conveniently dominated by the Church."

Stiyl Magnus took a deep breath. The orange light at the end of his cigarette flared as he sucked in oxygen. "The smuggler, Oriana Thomson, and the sender, Lidvia Lorenzetti. No wonder we couldn't find the other end of their deal—it didn't involve anyone else. All that talk about the Russian Catholic Church being under suspicion was a load of crap. *It was just something the Roman Orthodox Church was sending to themselves.*"

He paused for just a moment, then said this:

"We *will* stop this deal. If we don't, the world will come face-to-face with an even worse situation than if it had been destroyed."

Touma Kamijou and Motoharu Tsuchimikado both nodded.

Kamijou didn't know how much they could do with just the three of them. There was no proof they could even win against Oriana Thomson and Lidvia Lorenzetti supporting her.

Nevertheless.

If they pushed everything onto the people of Academy City for their convenience…If they were under the illusion that their Roman Orthodox Church could gain control of the world…

—Then he'd have to break that illusion with his own hand.

4

Touya and Shiina Kamijou walked through the city.

It was past one in the afternoon. According to the schedule listed in the thick pamphlet, lunch break had started long ago. Still, some places seemed to have events going on even now. The sequencing of plans in this regard was one of the athletic meet–like facets of the Daihasei Festival. International events such as the Olympics and the World Cup would have had much stricter schedules.

Touya rolled up his sleeves and lightly pulled on his worn dress shirt to smooth out the wrinkles, saying, "All right, then. It's a bit late, but let's go grab a spot for lunch, honey."

"Oh my. I agree." Shiina adjusted her refined-looking wide-brimmed hat. "…I feel as though I haven't seen Touma for a while. Was he really in that event?"

"Well, with that many people going at it in every event, there will be times we can't find him. We should just ask him about his heroic exploits when we meet him again. Anyhoo, let's go find a seat!"

Touya wasn't looking for somewhere to eat lunch because he was particularly hungry or anything. One of the things that set the Daihasei Festival apart from regular school athletic meets was the concept of securing seats. Unlike normal meets, events would move from stadium to stadium. You didn't just stay in one seat until the meet was finished. With children participating in multiple events, parents had to reserve spots in one place after the next.

Lunch, of course, was no exception. The athletes and spectators alike would be chased out of their stadium after the event ended, so they needed to secure seats for eating lunch. Academy City was host to 2.3 million people, and all the spectators from outside drove up that number. Those used to the congestion of a normal school cafeteria wouldn't find it hard to imagine what would happen if that many people all went to find food at once.

Touya's combed-back hair swayed to and fro as he looked around. "Though lunch break was supposed to start at noon, the event went longer than it should

have, and we were late getting out. I feel like we're a little late to the seat-grabbing battles."

"Oh my. We brought our own, so I don't think it's necessary to shop around for a spot," said Shiina pleasantly, looking down at the wicker basket hanging from her arm.

Touya frowned. "Honey, you're selling yourself short. You made us these bento, so we should find the spot where they will taste the best. Touma would be happy about it, and so would I. I do hope you will find it in your heart to be happy about it, too."

"My, my, Touya…" Shiina smiled brightly and put a hand to her cheek.

Touya loosened his tie with a hand and hurriedly turned his neck, looking for a place. He didn't notice her smile. "…Hmm. Looks like all the shops and benches around here are already taken. We *could* search for somewhere more out of the way, but then we would have more trouble telling Touma where to— What's that?" The rambling Touya suddenly spotted someone he knew past the crowd of people.

It was the college-aged woman they met before the opening ceremony. Right now she was walking with another girl who looked like she was in middle school. She wore the fundamental tank top and shorts of a track-and-field uniform, and her brown hair reached down to her shoulders. Touya thought he remembered her being called Mikoto. They were discussing something loudly; they must have been friendly sisters.

"Oh, Mikotooo! Are you offended Dad didn't come? Even I had to jump through hoops at university to get them to accept my request for time off, so give him a break!"

"…I don't care. Anyway, he's in London on work, right? It'd be way worse if he pushed himself and got here with a pale face."

"Right, yes! I bet Dad would love to hear you sound so disappointed about it. But Mikoto, you know, maybe Dad not being here was the right move after all!"

"??? Why?"

"Because there's a boy you like, isn't there? If Dad heard about *that*, his

reaction would be priceless!”

“Pfft?!” The middle school girl suddenly sputtered. Then her face went bright red, and it took everything she had to look up at the college student, who was a head taller than her. “Whaa-wh-wh-what are you even talking about right now?!”

“Huh? Was I wrooong? You don’t have trouble sleeping at night because you’re thinking about that boy with the spiky black hair and you start hugging your pillow without realizing it?”

“N-no, I don’t! How did you even come to that conclusion?! Wait, why do you even know about that idiot?!”

“Oh, now I’m curious! You sound so close to him, calling him *that idiot*! I want to know what you’ll make him do for the punishment game! See? It was a good thing Dad didn’t come! So spill it, Mikoto. ♪”

“Punishment game…Who told you about that?! Would you stop wiggling your hips and answer me already?!”

After seeing light blue sparks crackling from her bangs and shoulders, Touya once again felt impressed by Academy City. He never paid much attention to it, since his son, Touma, was a Level Zero, but this city was filled with espers like the kinds you’d see in movies and manga.

“You know, there’s a night parade tonight after the events are over, Mikoto! What’ll you do? Oh, maybe you’re going to put on a little light show with your electric attacks, just for the two of you?!”

“Pfft?! Y-you have no taste, you know that?! B-b-b-besides, what night parade? What does that have to do with me…?”

For the two of them, supernatural abilities were a familiar thing. They wouldn’t be surprised over every little thing. Touya knew that sort of atmosphere was something you could get only from Academy City.

Then, as he stood there dumbly, the college-aged girl and middle school girl appeared to notice him. The college-aged one’s face lit up. “Oh! Thank you very much for before! I was able to find Mikoto thanks to you…”

Unlike her, the middle school girl frowned. “…Wait, who are these people? More people from work?”

“Hee-hee! ♪ They’re the parents of the boy you like. Come on, Mikoto, make a good impression!!”

“Be quiet! Shut up! I told you it’s not like that!!” shouted the middle school girl as if she was about to bite her.

The college-aged girl completely ignored her. “By the way, have you eaten lunch yet? If not, would you like to eat with us? We were going to a small café, but it looks like you can bring your own bento there. That’s good, right, Mikoto?”

“Hmm.” Touya mulled over the proposition. Bringing their lunch into an eatery…wouldn’t be something anyone could blame them for, given the lack of space at the festival. And, of course, Shiina’s bento would be much more delicious if they ate in a calm atmosphere with more people. In any case, it would certainly be better for the delicate woman if she didn’t have to walk very far across the sunbaked asphalt.

So he replied, “That sounds good. We have one more coming, is that all right?”

“It’s completely okay! In fact, that would be perfect! Right, Mikoto? ♪”

The middle school girl looked up at the college student silently and angrily, her head tilted, light blue sparks crackling and popping all over. *What a unique girl*, thought Touya with a shake of his head. He turned back to Shiina. “If you’re all right with that, honey— Why are you making that face…?”

Shiina looked immeasurably disappointed; her face could have gone on the 1,000-or 5,000-yen bill. Touya found himself taking a step back. She spoke, her voice clear yet her lips not moving. “You really are like this all the time, Touya. What would you like me to do? Would you like me to throw this entire basket of food at you? Oh my. Oh my, oh my, oh my. How terrible. Touma had nothing to do with this, and now he’ll have to go without lunch.”

“Why are you mad?!” cried Touya, shuffling away instantly. He couldn’t say for sure that Shiina’s words were a joke. She was a noblewoman—whenever they fought about something, she would throw anything nearby at him, whether it

was a glass plate or a DVD player. That's why Touya had backed away from her.

But that itself ended in disaster as someone else ran into him from behind. "Whoa!! S-sorry!!"

He turned around and immediately put his head down in apology. The first thing he saw was a girl's huge cleavage. They'd been so close that his apologetic bow came off as taking a peek at it.

Touya sprang up twice as fast. "I-I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry! Ahhhh… Meanwhile, my wife is staring laser beams at my back…!!" It was probably an absolute mess behind him, but Touya didn't have the guts to check. Instead he met the girl's eyes again.

"No, not at all. You aren't hurt, are you? I apologize. I'm not very used to crowds like this."

It was a woman—with long blond hair tied into a complex, irregular style.

It was a woman—with the fair skin and blue eyes of a Westerner.

It was a woman—with a well-proportioned body brimming with sensuality.

He heard a small metallic ring. There was a thin metal ring on her long index finger, about two centimeters across. On the ring was a bunch of thick, rectangular pieces of paper about the size of a stick of gum, looped through the ring by holes. It was a flash-card ring meant for memorization.

She fiddled with them as though they were keys. "This nice older lady doesn't mind at all, so don't worry too much— Oh, but it looks like I'm the younger one here, aren't I? Anyway, good-bye," she said shortly, turning her back to Touya.

She walked naturally into the crowd and eventually disappeared. Nobody noticed her gaudy appearance and stifling good looks.

Touya looked after her for a few moments.

"Oh my. Oh my, oh my, oh my. Touya? How am I going to wake you up from this? I do wonder if you're weak to locks. Oh my, this will not do. Whatever shall I do? I may just accidentally turn you into one of the stars in the night sky."

"No…No, honey, you're wrong, I certainly wasn't fascinated by her face or her chest or hips or legs or anything like that, and what I mean is, well, I'm sorry for

everything!!”

Mikoto watched Touya as he cut into apologies halfway through and muttered to herself, “…Yeah, they’re related.”

They, however, were unaware.

Unaware of what was slowly happening in Academy City.

Unaware of a boy familiar to them running around trying to stop it.

Unaware…

…of the danger that had stopped four millimeters from Touya’s nose.

Nobody in this city was a safe bystander anymore. Everyone was surrounded by danger as the Daihasei Festival ramped up even further…

…in both the scientific *and* the magical way.

AFTERWORD

For those of you who have been reading every volume, I'm glad to see you again.

For those of you who bought all nine volumes at once, it's a pleasure to meet you.

I'm Kazuma Kamachi.

I get the feeling I've been throwing curveballs at you every time, and this one's another curveball. You'll have to read the book to find out what makes it one.

The occult keyword of this book is an attack on some pretty fundamental concepts. Everything that showed up was something that has already shown up in past volumes, like grimoires and magic circles.

The Daihasei Festival sets the stage. It's basically a super-giant athletic meet. How did you like it? I personally had completely forgotten about athletic meets. What kinds of games did they play again? Is there a difference between what kids play now and what they used to? Those were some of my concerns as I wrote the book. I do hope the athletic festival feel got through all right.

I'd like to thank Mr. Haimura for his illustrations and Ms. Miki, my editor. Without them, this work would have never made it to completion. I look forward to working with you both in the future.

And I'd like to thank all the readers. I wouldn't have even *started* to write this if it wasn't for all of you. I look forward to giving you more to read in the future.

Now, as I decide to close out this page, and as I pray you will take your hand and open the next one, now, on this day, I lay down my pen.

So, wait, who was the heroine?

Kazuma Kamachi

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A CERTAIN MAGICAL INDEX, Volume 9

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